

“Wondering Where I’m Bound” – presentation on the afterlife as part of the Aging Well Series, Sunnybrook United Church, October 18, 2018

“Do not be afraid!” is the most common imperative in the New Testament.

While I have many questions about the afterlife, and much of what I want to say this afternoon raises as many questions as answers, everything I say I want to be heard in the context of those four words, “Do not be afraid!” We can face questions without fear; we can face uncertainty without fear; we can face judgement without fear; and we can face death without fear.

I am going to assume that most of you here have at least some acquaintance with the Christian faith, so I can focus on distinguishing the point of view of my tradition in the United Church from that of some alternatives that you may well be familiar with. Let me say that although my perspective differs markedly from many of the more stereotypical forms of Christianity, everything I will say this afternoon is a widely held interpretation.

While there are some Christian teachers and preachers who speak about this life as insignificant compared to what is to come, I think they have it wrong. Most Christians think of the afterlife, not as diminishing the significance of this life, but as affirming its eternal significance. But what does that mean?

When the New Testament uses the word “eternity” or the phrase “eternal life,” it is not referring just to the afterlife. Eternal life is about our relationship with the eternal, both in this life and the next. So when I say that Christian teaching about the afterlife affirms the eternal significance of how we live in this life, I don’t mean that we will face everlasting rewards or punishments in the afterlife. I mean rather that the way we live here matters to God and our relationship to the eternal.

Which brings me to heaven, hell and judgement, and here I am treading on territory that is fiercely debated in Christian circles. Some Christians talk about God’s judgement in ways that sound pretty harsh and (frankly) judgmental, but others of us think of God’s judgement as a hopeful thing, guided throughout by love and grace. In this world, we are constantly judged by our society and our neighbours for our wealth (or lack of wealth), our celebrity, our intellect, our

race or creed, sexual orientation or gender identity, our abilities or disabilities, our “success” in worldly terms, by whether we “fit in” or “measure up.” And often, even most of the time, those social judgements disgrace us, shame us and diminish us. Even if we live a charmed life, at the end, mortality catches up with us, and we end up disabled, infirm, old, with all the judgement and shame that accompany that. But in speaking of God’s judgement, Christians affirm that the ways we are judged by society are not the ultimate judgements. God’s judgement is hopeful, because it affirms that the one who is our final judge is the one who made us the way as we are, and who loved us all so much that He died for us.

Because God is judge, ultimately, everything in us will be judged by the standard of God’s love and grace and everything in us that is unworthy of that love and grace will be purged, like the impurities in metal are burned away through the refiner’s fire. I think of judgement, therefore, not as deciding that some individuals will suffer everlasting torment, and others everlasting bliss, but as a purification, in which, by God’s grace, we are all potentially made worthy of living in the presence of the holy. I find it hopeful that through God’s judgement, both in this life and the next, I will be made pure, through this refining process of God’s judgement. That is why in the United Church our statement of faith says that God is both “our judge and our hope.” God is our hope because God is judge.

To address directly the question of what happens after we die, we turn to the resurrection of Jesus. Resurrection, by the way, is a Jewish concept which emphasizes the unity of the human being. Later Greek thought introduced a dualistic vision of body and soul, which also profoundly influenced the way Christians think about death and the afterlife, often by disparaging the importance of the body.

But the New Testament primarily uses the language of resurrection. The apostle Paul, who wrote the earliest documents in the New Testament, is the only New Testament author who is said to have encountered the risen Christ. Strangely, however, although Paul claims that Jesus’ resurrection is the model for our own, he never tries to describe the resurrected Jesus. In fact, he

discourages speculation about what happens after death. In his most extended discussion of the subject, Paul compares the earthly body to a seed of grain, and says that the resurrected body is as different from these bodies as a plant that emerges from seed. There is continuity as well, in that metaphor, but there is also profound difference. And because it is so different, he says, we shouldn't speculate about it. It is beyond our capacity to describe.

I have many questions about the afterlife. The biochemist in me wonders if consciousness could transcend the death of the physical brain? Or is death really the end for us as individuals? I don't know.

Do we live on as individuals, only in the communities we influence during our earthly lives or are we absorbed into what Carl Jung called the "collective unconscious?" I don't know.

Many people report near-death experiences and claim to communicate with the dead. Are these experiences simply psychological phenomena with natural explanations, or are they evidence of a community of the living and the dead that continues? I don't know.

What lies beyond death remains a mystery to me. That is not a bad thing; In fact I think that mystery and paradox are the source of some of our greatest wisdom. So I am prepared to face my own death without a need to resolve this mystery, this great paradox of life and death.

There is a song we sing in the United Church that celebrates how God accompanies us in each stage of the life cycle: I was there to hear your bawling cry; I was there in your childhood and adolescence, in your adulthood and middle age. And at the end the song speaks of death with these lines:

"When the evening gently closes in,
and you shut your weary eyes,
I'll be there as I have always been
with just one more surprise."

Don't be afraid, but know that whatever happens after death, the love at the heart of the universe will be there with just one more surprise.