

Hereafter or Here and Now?

The Sadducees were trying to trap Jesus so they used one of the “hot button” issues of their day: Is there life after death? And they aren’t the only ones. What follows this earthly existence has always been a hot topic. From the ancient pyramids to Dante’s *Inferno* and Michelangelo’s painting of the Last Judgment, to contemporary films like *Flatliners*, and best sellers like *Five People You Meet in Heaven*, or even *Wakey*, *Wakey*, the play I’ll see at Dobama Theatre in Cleveland Heights this afternoon, almost every culture gives evidence of the universal interest in the afterlife.

Our preoccupation with the hereafter, however, often overshadows the importance of the here and now. What we can learn from attempts to foresee our future is the importance of the way we live our lives today. Even Jesus, in his definitive image of the final judgment in Matthew 25, made it clear that it is how we deal with our relationships in the here and now that reveals what will come to pass in the hereafter.

Human relationships, for people of faith, are patterned after the relationship God has with all of creation and especially with each one of us as part of that creation. God chose to create our world out of love. There is no other explanation. That divine self-giving love created and sustains us and becomes the model for all our relationships. The story of that love, the Divine Covenant, revealed for us in the Sacred Scriptures and our own experience, is at the same time a foretaste of what is to be.

Father Ronald Rolheizer has reflected on the tension associated between this world and the relatively unknown world of the hereafter in his book *Beyond the Infinite Horizon*. He uses the image of the birth trauma to draw a comparison to our fear of death. He points out that the infant comes into this world virtually kicking and screaming until placed in the arms of a loving and caring mother. He writes in another place:

Perhaps no image then is as apt, as powerful, as consoling, and as accurate in terms of picturing what happens to us when we die and awake to eternal life as is the image of a mother holding and cradling her newborn child. When we die, we die into the arms of God and surely we're received with as much love, gentleness, and tenderness as we were received in the arms of our mothers at birth.

What we face is a return to the one who loved us with that unconditional, everlasting love. It is that love we are able to experience in our own relationships here and now. That's why he taught that the greatest commandment was to love one another. What husband and wife, parent and child, friend and lover alike can experience in their personal relationships has the potential of being a microcosm of God's love for us, a love witnessed in that moment when God entered the human experience in the person of Jesus. Through the Christ, then, we come to share in the divine life. We share that life sacramentally in this Eucharist. One day we will experience it fully in what we call the hereafter, eternity, heaven.

It isn't about who will be married to whom in the hereafter. It's about a relationship with our Creator that can be nurtured and developed in the here now with one another on this planet. It's about a relationship that we can only wonder at now. Until we all come to that experience, we pray at this Eucharist in the words of the Psalm sung today:

*Keep me as the apple of your eye,
hide me in the shadow of your wings.
But I in justice shall behold your face;
on waking I shall be content in your presence.*

We prepare for the hereafter here and now.

* "Dying Into Safe Hands, November 3, 2013, <http://ronrolheiser.com/en/>