

HEAVEN ON EARTH

As a child, I remember singing the old hymn, *This World is Not My Home*:

This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through

My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue,

The angels beckon me from heaven's open door.

And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

Maybe the reason that hymn is no longer sung is because very few people think that way. And maybe that's a good thing because as my seminary president would say, some people can become so heavenly-minded that they're of no earthly good.

On the other hand, neither is it good to consider this life as something to be held onto at any cost. Today's society is in denial about death. Just count all the anti-aging creams, hair dye and energy drink commercials in an hour of television.

Despite all these claims, the reality of death cannot be escaped, as we were reminded this week with the loss of Angie Pontz. If God can indeed make good out of any situation, the good from this tragedy is it reminded us that no one knows the length of our time on earth, and while we should value every second we have, we need to be prepared for what follows.

The best balance I've seen between heaven minded and earth bound is the attitude demonstrated by the Apostle Paul as he writes to the Philippians: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." Paul, under house arrest in Rome, was facing the fact that he didn't know what the next day held. He might be found innocent and set free, or he might be executed. And the wonderful thing was, he could honestly say it made no difference to him. He would enjoy life as long as he had time on this earth, and would put it toward ministry for Christ. But when death came, it was nothing to dread.

Paul was able to write this because he had a very special relationship with the church of Philippi and its members. In Acts 16, we're told how Paul was on his second missionary trip when he had a vision to go into modern day Greece. In Philippi, he met Lydia, a merchant in purple cloth, who welcomed him into her home and was baptized. And thus the first Christian church was founded on European soil.

Paul wrote this letter to the church in part to thank them for sending him a gift of money. While on his missionary trips, Paul never allowed anyone to support him financially. He worked as a tentmaker in whatever community he served so he was not to become dependent upon the people. The fact that he made an exception for the Philippians underscores his affection for them.

But there was another reason Paul wanted to write. The Christians at Philippi are naturally concerned for Paul's safety. This letter comes near the end of Paul's life when he was under house arrest in Rome, awaiting – per his own request – a trial on the charges that he was undermining Jewish law.

For those concerned that Paul's days were limited, Paul responds not with despair or gloom, but rather with joy. More than 20 times in this short letter, Paul uses the word joy or rejoice. In Philippians 4:4, he shares the verse, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Why could he feel such joy?

Because of him, "to live is Christ and to die is gain." In other words, he acknowledges that he doesn't know which to expect – continued life or sudden death. Instead of a sense of dread or choosing one as the better, Paul sees himself in a win-win situation. He doesn't know whether to prefer life or death, because each offers him an opportunity. Life means continued ministry on earth; death means living with Christ in heaven.

In other words, death is not an escape from the concerns of life. Paul is committed to care for his churches and to share God's good news about Jesus. For that reason, he rejoices at the idea that he just might be acquitted by the courts, in which case he wants to continue to minister in Spain.

But neither is life to be held onto at all costs. Tradition records that Paul was beheaded in Rome for his teachings. And while he may not have been able to travel to Spain to preach, we learn from his writings and others that the guards that were assigned to him during his imprisonment in Rome were converted by Christianity by the way he lived and the way he died.

That's the balance Paul invites us to seek: To enjoy every moment on earth as allotted to us by God, but to live our lives full of joy as a dress rehearsal for the life that is to follow. We shouldn't hold onto this life anymore than we should expect to have real joy in the life to come. We should be joyful in life and in the resurrection won for us through Christ.

And one more thing: We are not to think of eternal life as our only reward. As soon as we accept Christ as our Lord, we should be living on this earth as if we are already in heaven.

That was the problem with the servants first hired in the parable told by Jesus. This parable was very true to life for early Israel. In the old days, every able-bodied man would carry his tools down to the town square, hoping to be hired by a local landowner, and so have work from sunup to sundown.

But anyone who was slow out the door or anyone who compared to others didn't look so able bodied – these would be left behind. And even some who were initially hired might be told no, the landowner has too many, and they'd have to trudge back to the town square in hopes there were still landowners looking for workers for the day. On most days, if you didn't have a

job by 9 a.m., you didn't have a job for the day – which meant, you did not have money at the end of the day to buy that night's meal.

But in Jesus' parable, there is a very generous landowner. He arrives at 6 a.m. and the laborers negotiate their wages for the day. The landowner accepts their terms and sends the men off to his vineyard.

But that's not the end of the job fair. The landowner returns to the town square at 9 a.m., noon, 3 and 5 p.m. And each time, he finds workers who weren't available that morning but had since shown up to work. And he tells each group to go to work for him, which they all willingly do – even though there is no mention of their wages for the time they will spend.

Now in those days, it was considered a sin to not pay a person at the end of each day for that day's work especially since most laborers existed day to day. And so it is that at sunset, all of the workers line up to be paid, beginning with the last hired.

And there, the first workers are astonished and then angered to see that those who worked for only an hour are receiving the exact same wage: a denarius. Very nice if you are one of the last to be hired, but not so nice if you were out there at 6 a.m. picking grapes. And yet, when they protest, they are rightly reminded by the landowner that it is his money, and if he chooses to be generous, who are they to protest?

What is this parable trying to say? It speaks to us about the generosity of God, that whether we have been raised in the church and members all our lives, or joined the church in mid life, or even only came to God through a deathbed confession, we all receive the same wages: we all receive eternal life.

And I know some lifelong Christians who like the first workers grumble a little. How fair is it if God gives eternal life at the end of our journey just as freely as He does to those who have

labored long and hard. Doesn't it mean we should all just lay back and wait till our dying breath to profess Jesus as Lord?

But consider what Jesus is saying to us in the parable, just as Paul declares in Philippians: living in Christ. We may all receive the same wages, but there are fringe benefits we receive along the way that need to be taken into account – and which can make living on earth feel as if we're already in heaven.

For one thing, those who were hired first thing worked all day with the peace of mind knowing what their wages will be. Not so for those who didn't come to God until the end of their lives. We should be thankful that every day, we can live joyfully as Paul because, in spite of any temporary circumstances, we know ultimately who has the last word in our lives.

And even better, those first hired worked all day long with fellow servants. They were able to laugh together; they were able to share burdens together. They were involved in the same work, and that created community between them.

The difference belonging to church should make to us is that we are in community on earth as we will be in heaven. When we laugh, we can do so together. And when we come across hard times, we don't have to go them alone. We have those around us who know us and love us and will comfort and encourage us until we are able to get back on our feet – and provide that comfort and encouragement to others.

I was comforted this week as I visited Donna Birdseye. As I prepared to go, I offered a word of prayer for Donna, for her continued healing and strength. And when I finished with “amen,” Donna picked right up in prayer, praying for Doris Pontz and family.

I invite us as we go forth this week, may we live our lives with the attitude that living is Christ, and dying is gain.