The Boundaries of Heaven

Ezekiel 33: 7-11 Romans 13: 8-14 Matthew 18: 15-20

RR: Psalm 119: 33-40

**Summary:** If we wonder where the boundaries of Heaven are: what and who is “out” or “in,” know that those boundaries are in the same place as the boundary of God’s love.

 Clearly, Ezekiel preaches, we have a great responsibility when we love God. We have a responsibility to ourselves, to turn every moment away from our former sin and head in a godly direction. The twin duty is a responsibility to each other: to encourage that godly direction for others in our faith family and warn each other when we start slip-sliding away.

 That is holy love because we know it is not God’s will to damn, but rather, to save. In fact, this active love is a virtual armory for the Christian soldier. However, as I say this, I feel a need to be clear about what is meant by the phrase Paul uses: “the weapons of the Lord Jesus Christ.” I remember the line in ***Stand Up, stand up, for Jesus***, which says: “For not with swords loud clashing nor roll of stirring drums, but with deeds of love and mercy, the heavenly kingdom comes!”

 Yes, we need more love and mercy and less tear gas and high pressure hoses. Another weapon Jesus used was prayer; He started every day that way. Another tool we see Jesus using is the Bible. In fact, in Ephesians 6:17, Paul calls this, “the sword of the spirit.”

 Finally, there is faith, an attribute which opens all the resources of heaven and engages God as we seek to turn ourselves, or any other lost sheep, in the direction of the Good Shepherd. Problems come up when we disagree among ourselves about the precise route to take as we navigate there.

 The Gospel passage, taken in a rigid, legalist fashion, has led many communities into shunning. The Puritans, the Amish, and many other sects – including the early Christian church -- believed in shunning as a desperation act of love to bring sinners to their senses. It is not uncommon to find modern Christians pointing to some lifestyle or some group that they fear might not make it to Heaven. Yet, confusingly, we are promised that what two or more deny or accept will be that way in Heaven. How can this paradox be true?

 One of my favorite stories speaks of a man newly arrived in Heaven, being given a tour by St. Peter himself. “Look there,” says the saint, pointing to an ornate temple with sacred statues all around the grounds and incense pouring out open, stained glass windows on the top floor. “Those Greek Orthodox love their ceremonies!”

 They pass by a clearing where a crowd is gathered to hear an earnest young saint preaching from the top of a large stump. “Those Methodists love an outdoor worship!” Saint Peter exclaims.

 And so it continued as they passed Baptists by the river, some Amish and Mennonites raising a barn, a crowd of Pentecostals praising in tongues and the African Zion fellowship joining in a huge, sacred circle dance with Quakers, Shakers, and Native Americans. There was a great, hugging parade along an endless rainbow boulevard. They saw Communions, sadars, agape feasts, and ascetic fasts celebrated by people in hijabs, yarmulkes, and Domaru (samurai armor).

 Finally, the pair came up on a tiny church without any windows, surrounded by a huge hedge and guarded by dozens of angels with flaming swords. “Who worships there?” asked the newcomer.

 “Shhhh,” replied Saint Peter in a whisper, “That’s your church, you all think you’re the only ones up here!”

 I can’t come up with a boundary for God’s love. Even the unforgivable sin, the sin against the Holy Spirit, is very likely someone refusing to accept forgiveness. I cannot imagine anyone eternally refusing God’s love, and that is my best argument for universal salvation. There is no boundary to God’s love and patience; so, unless we want to board ourselves up in Heaven, we’d best start practicing accepting each other here.

 Prayer, God’s Word, and faith do not keep sentry on some wall to keep the riff-raff out of Heaven. Instead, they open a door which no one can shut. Let’s keep this door at Gaines open because, when we do get to Heaven, we know we won’t be the only ones there!