

Three contractors, a Baptist, a Lutheran, and a Presbyterian, die and find themselves standing outside the pearly gates. St. Peter greets them saying, "Welcome! I have good news and bad news. The good news is that you are all in! Your salvation is at hand! You are about to enter heaven!"

"Hallelujah," says the Baptist. "Yes, hallelujah," says the Lutheran. "You mentioned "bad news?" says the Presbyterian.

"Yes," says Peter, "the bad news is these pearly gates. They've been here for quite a while, and well, they could use some work. Could you give me a bid?"

The Baptist takes some measurements, makes a few phone calls, and turns to Peter and says, "\$2000." The Lutheran does the same and says, "\$2200." The Presbyterian doesn't measure a thing. He stand by Peter the whole time, and when Peter turns to him, he doesn't hesitate but promptly replies, "\$4000."

"\$4000!" Says Peter, "Why so much?"

The Presbyterian leans in to him and says, "Peter, \$1000 for you, \$1000 for me. We'll get the Baptist to do it."

Revelation 21 gives us a vision of those pearly gates. The entrance to heaven is described thusly: *Revelation 21:21 (NRSV): "And the 12 gates are 12 pearls, each one of the gates is a single pearl, and the streets of the city are pure gold, transparent as glass."*

Yes, heaven has pearly gates and streets of gold. It's a city that will be something to see, and as inspiring as it is to envision what John shows us (one great Christian writer, my ancestor Richard Baxter, said that we should contemplate heaven for 30 minutes per day - that's a good idea!), there's more to heaven than a lot of glitz and glitter. We have a glorious future, and that future, God's future, invites us to keep the faith today. The city of God, New Jerusalem, challenges us to be agents of change in the city in which we live. Heaven is more than a promise; it is a paradigm, a model of how this world is meant to be; we are citizens and stakeholders of God's new heaven and new earth; heaven is our home town.

I. Pearly Gates and Streets of Gold

There may be a grain of truth to that contractor story I began the sermon with. Not the part about the Presbyterian overbidding; we would measure first. No, the grain of truth may be Peter's confession that the pearly gates need some work. After all, John tells us, *"the gates*

will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there." Peter doesn't need a contractor; he needs a locksmith!

Revelation is a book of symbols; it is fitting that it is the final book in the Bible, because John weaves images from throughout Scripture in the vision he casts of the city of God. The raw materials of the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, are the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel and the accounts of Solomon's temple; the message he communicates through what can be a bewildering and dazzling array of images is this: God remembers. God remembers God's promises. God remembers God's purpose. God remembers, and what God remembers, God fulfills.

So, the pearl: Jesus taught us *Matthew 7:6 (NRSV) do not throw your pearls before swine ... Matthew 13:45–46 (NRSV) "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."*

Pearls are precious; they were in Jesus' day; they still are. An irritated oyster produces one the world's great treasures. The pearl represents the kingdom of heaven and our faith in God's promise. So how much do we value our faith? How much do the promises of God mean to us? How precious is our citizenship in the kingdom of heaven through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? Are we giving God our all, or are we begrudging God what's left? God has given us time. God has given us talent. Are we putting them to work for the sake of the kingdom, or are we throwing our pearls before swine?

We are meant for more than that; we are destined to walk on streets of gold. Now, on first reading, this sounds like a scene out of "Indiana Jones and the Incan Treasure." It evokes memories of the days when pirates sailed the Spanish Main preying on trade ships that were weighed down with gold from the New World; it reminds us of Yukon Cornelius searching the North Pole for "silver and gold." The history of humanity can be told in terms of our greed for gold, but there is more to the consummation of our history than our setting foot on "the mother lode."

Heaven's streets of gold take us back to Solomon's Temple, specifically to the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant, which was covered with gold, rested in a room that was lined with gold; when Israel contemplated God's dwelling place, the experience of God's presence, their eye gleamed with the glitter of gold. When we walk on those streets of gold, we walk with God. We see God face to face. No more tears. No more fears. All is well for all is forgiven, and we are at peace!

Pearly gates; streets of gold; symbols full of promise; symbols rich with possibility; we are meant for more; we are destined to walk through those pearly gates on streets of gold. We will take those steps; God will bring us through, and when God does; we will see; we will know: God remembers. The promise has been kept; the covenant fulfilled; until that great day, God's promise is worth living for; every step we take brings us a step closer to our home town.

II. Our Home Town

Heaven is more than a promise; it is a paradigm, the vision of God's new world is a model for this world. Hope is more than a flight of fancy; it is both a call to action and the power to act; hope in God's new world makes a difference in this world; it applies to our real problems in this often unreal world. Our heavenly home speaks to our way of life in our home town.

One of the dynamics of our heavenly home that most challenges our home town has to do with those pearly gates, *Revelation 21:25 (NRSV) its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.*

Heaven is open; the barriers are down. We live in a world defined by barriers; who's in, who's out; location, location, location.

Which brings us to our home town, and the barrier which is the line that separates the Antietam School District and the Exeter Township School District; should this barrier continue to exist? Should the two school districts become one?

Recent weeks featured public forums on this question; there was a lot of positive energy; this could be a creative solution to the challenge posed by ever-rising property taxes; perhaps opening the gate and letting this barrier down could serve the common good.

These are questions that merit further investigation, and we as people of faith can contribute to the common good by keeping the gate open, keeping the conversation going, and resisting the temptation to play it safe and keep the peace by closing the gate.

The history of this question shows us at our worst. In round 1, Antietam closed the gate, because Exeter wasn't good enough. In round 2, Exeter closed the gate, because Antietam had it coming. We answered this question out of our pride, and Proverbs teaches us, *Proverbs 16:18 (NRSV) Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*

Will the third time be the charm? Will we answer this question out of what is best in us rather than succumbing to what is worst?

These are questions that merit further investigation; the common good is God's future breaking into our present; it is a glimpse of what is come; we read about that future in the Bible and say, "Won't that be great!" What we ignore is the calling that God's future issues to God's people in the present. The gap between what is and what will be is a call to roll up our sleeves and get to work; in that work, job 1 is the most often repeated command in the Bible, "Do not be afraid." God's future is in God's hands; the pearly gates are open. "Do not be afraid" of what is to come. And "do not be afraid" of "them."

Some of the comments in the paper suggest that we are afraid of them. We are afraid of losing our identity. What will become of us if we join with them? And I cannot help but wonder if some of our fear is skin deep. Are our comments veiled attempts to preserve a safe distance between white and Hispanic and keep "Reading" outside the gates?

Heaven has a lot to say about how we live in our home town. Merging school districts is a major change; change on this magnitude is never easy; it gets complicated and messy; it's not for the faint of heart.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, residents in the Antietam and Exeter Township School Districts (and if you reside in a different district - pray for us, and watch, because your day will come), citizens of the kingdom of heaven, Pennside Presbyterian Church: do not be afraid, and do not allow the fear of change to reduce a significant question to a simple answer. Do not allow the hatred of "them" to find a home in your heart. The future is in God's hands. The pearly gates are open; there is no night; there is no need to fear; nothing can take the future from God's hands. Whatever we decide to do, decide based on what we hope for rather than by what we fear. Rise above self-interest and petty pride and dare to seek the common good. Be Christians, citizens of God's future in the here and now, in this matter, so that the future of our region, the future of our children and our children's children is defined in terms of faith, hope, and love. The future is in God's hands, the vision of heaven is a paradigm for life here on earth; heaven is the model for us to follow, so follow it for God's sake and for the sake of our home town. Amen.