

**Exodus 16:2-15; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16**  
**17th Sunday after Pentecost A; 09.24.23; G. Miles Smith+**

*Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

What I am going to talk about in these next few minutes is focused on the Collect of the Day prayed earlier in the bulletin. So I'm going to focus on *anxiety*...and the *heavenly*. I wonder: Does that touch something in you? I know it does me.

And it became more tangible to me when I wrote my first version of this homily--and then realized it was more about *anxiety* than the *heavenly*. Maybe that is just one example of the difficulty we all tend to have.

- We know a lot about what makes us anxious.
- Do we know enough of the heavenly to be able to love it?
- And what do we even mean when we speak of “things heavenly”?

But before I try to talk about the heavenly, I do need to say two quick things about anxiety:

One, is that *every generation before us has needed to pray for release from anxiety too*. The *grumbling* in the Exodus story was definitely motivated by anxiety. Even though the Israelites had been able to escape from their slavery in Egypt against all odds and had prospects of a whole new life ahead of them, it wasn't long before they became hungry in the wilderness with no obvious solution. It was disorienting and anxiety-producing for them...to move from freedom...to yet another vulnerability. And we too have known what it is like to pass from a high...to a low...from a place of strength...to a place of vulnerability.

Second, it just might be that we are the most anxious era of human beings ever. And if that is true then it may be because, with all our smarts and desire for power and profit, we have created some very successful technological means for us to be even more anxious. [What could we say those are? Immediate access to news. The vulnerability of participating in social media. News and social media corporations which profit from stoking anxiety. Politicians who weaponize our anxieties. And just the crazy complexity of trying to navigate almost anything anymore.] And all that is added to all the usual vulnerabilities of life.

*So, we can know a lot about what makes us anxious*. And we can be psychologically aware enough to try to help ourselves by seeking to make some healthy lifestyle choices, plus, when needed...counseling and appropriate medications. And yet while practical wisdoms help, they are not the same thing as *loving things heavenly*. Do we know enough about the heavenly to be able to love it? And what do we even mean when we speak of “things heavenly”?

Perhaps the first thing we might think of is *the heavenly as that which is not here...but hopefully will be there for us on the other side of death*. That would be heaven as *an ultimate destination, entirely beyond our present experience*. And that has been a comfort to countless people. But it has also been a point of anxiety too when the Church has often presumed to determine who may receive that blessing and who may not. The most succinct way I can describe my understanding of this is to say that we should trust and pray that all people will be received in heaven by the grace of God...but there remains a mystery of whether or not all people will want to live with God. But nevertheless, that kind of heaven is real, and it can be loved, in faith and hope.

But we can also think of “things heavenly” along the lines of what the apostle Paul said about the “*fruits of the Spirit*”. These are ways that “things heavenly” become tangible in our experience when we encounter them in others: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5). When we encounter these gifts in others...they can rightly be called *heavenly*. And yet we are also likely to not

recognize them as such. And when others encounter those gifts in us...it can be heavenly for them, if they can also recognize it as such. This kind of experience of the heavenly actually surrounds us so often and so unremarkably that we overlook it. Having moments of *heavenly company* through familiar friends and family and even the unexpected stranger is something to love as heavenly. And, by the way, that kind of company could very well include our animal friends. [Blessing of the Animals, Sunday, October 8, 4pm]

We can also think of “things heavenly” in terms of *beauty*...in music, literature, the visual arts, culinary arts, and nature. In fact, everyone of us has probably, at some time, remarked how a piece of music was “just heavenly”. We could just be describing an aesthetic experience we had of the gifts of a good professional—which of course it is. But such moments can also be “things heavenly”. It depends on how you look at it.

And this brings me to my last point. Heavenly things exist whether we realize them in our experience or not. But to be able to realize them, someone has to help us see. And that is made possible by a spiritual community in Christ. Apart from some community of people who have learned to see this way, based on scripture and the Holy Spirit, then things heavenly can be unrecognizable in our experience of life. And all that remains are the frequent anxieties.

The world in which we live, even if we identify as Christian, effectively discourages our imagination of heavenly things. And while that is a perennial truth, it is also true that the modern world does so far more than our long ago ancestors experienced. *There is more to heavenly things than we can hardly dream of anymore.*

But it is not impossible. *Because things heavenly...are things real...and are generously given...by God.*

So, I want to end this by giving you a little exercise of attention. As we pray and sing our way through the rest of this service, I want to ask you to try to notice...every time...that the word “heaven” is used. I counted 10 times—and that doesn’t even include indirect references to heaven.

And truthfully, there are even more signs of heaven than that...when we walk out the door.