



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

April 30, 2017

Living in the Thin Places

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

Living in the Thin Places

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

© 2017 by Dr. Jim Gilchrist and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: May 5, 2017

Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Luke 10:8-9).

There’s a notion in Celtic spirituality that some places in this world are “thinner” than others. There are places where the barrier between heaven and earth is so thin that heaven shines through more clearly than most of us would ordinarily know.

Jesus talks about the “kingdom of heaven” or the “kingdom of God” all the time. It’s the place where he comes from, and where his disciples ultimately belong. It’s where we’ll arrive one day too, by the grace of God, if we follow him all the way to the end of this life.

St. Paul says, “Our citizenship is in heaven.” Paul was a Jew, proud of his ancestry and his knowledge of the Torah, and he boasted about being a Roman citizen as well, which gave him some status and security in this world. But none of that mattered so much to Paul after he came to know Jesus. What mattered most to him then was the kingdom of heaven.

People have wondered, at least since the time of Jesus, If heaven is real, where exactly is it?

Some scholars like to say that, back in the day, people believed in a “three-story universe,” with earth in the middle, heaven above, and hell below. Then they say, with the tone of those who know the way things really are, that we moderns are not so naïve any more. We have science now. We’ve gone into space, and as the Russian cosmonaut

said decades ago, he went up and looked around, and he didn't see God and he didn't see heaven, so surely those notions are all just a myth. And we have geology now, so we know that the center of the earth is a core of molten rock, not the sort of place where anything could live—not the souls of the departed, not the devil, not anything at all—so that means there is no hell either.

Some people say that because we can't believe in the three-story universe any more we can't believe in heaven or hell—at least not as real physical places. Instead, they say, those are just states of mind. Heaven and hell exist only in our heads, and if we experience them at all, it's only as part of our earthly existence.

Well of course heaven and hell are states of mind, because that's how we experience everything in this life. Milton reminded us of that in *Paradise Lost*. But is that all they are?

Even modern physicists routinely talk about theories of ten dimensions or more, where only four are familiar to us—three dimensions of space and one of time. And another widely-held notion among some scientists is that what we call “the universe” might be just one of many universes, part of what they call the “multiverse,” a vast array of universes inaccessible to each other but all none the less real.

So the notion that heaven and hell can't be real places because they're not “above” and “below” us in the ordinary sense, such that we could never find them on Google Maps, might not settle the matter after all. Maybe what's naïve is the idea that our inability to say *where* heaven is somehow implies that there is no such place.

What if heaven really is a place, but rather than being “up there” somewhere in space, it’s a reality that’s all around us, though in some different set of dimensions than the ones we’re familiar with? What if, as Celtic spirituality has said for centuries, there are thin places where the boundary between this world and the heavenly realm is not so impermeable, and some people at least can have a taste of heaven here and now as that realm breaks into this one? What if, when Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven has come near,” he means it in some quite literal sense, because he himself has come back and forth across that boundary?

That all makes perfect sense to me, and it would help to explain a whole host of experiences that spiritually sensitive people have reported for a very long time.

For one thing, many who have had near-death experiences describe the sensation of visiting some other realm where things are similar to those of this world, but also very different. They say that colors are brighter and sounds are clearer and the whole atmosphere breathes light and love in a way that’s different from ordinary experience here. Some of them talk about meeting people who have gone before, though no one there suffers the afflictions of old age or sickness or handicap. And they often describe getting from here to there and back again as passing through some sort of barrier, rather than traveling a long distance in space—as if another realm lay just beyond some thin boundary separating this world from that one.

Near-death experiences and shared-death experiences, where people who are perfectly well share some of those boundary-crossing sensations with loved ones who are dying, don’t prove anything, of course, but

they're consistent with the idea that heaven is not "up there" someplace far from earth, but closer to all of us than we're inclined to imagine.

Again, Jesus himself says that the kingdom of heaven has come near, and if the physical characteristics of that world are similar to but also rather different from those of this world, that might help to explain the otherwise strange claims of Jesus' disciples around Easter time. It might explain how he was crucified, dead, and buried, but then they saw him alive again; how the doors of the house where they gathered were locked, but Jesus came and stood among them; how he met a couple of them on the road to Emmaus and walked with them for a while, but they didn't even recognize him until they all sat down together and ate, and shortly after that he vanished.

No-nonsense materialists, of course, will say nothing of that sort can ever happen because their own metaphysical assumptions and materialist dogma tell them it's impossible. They think all this talk of Easter and of heaven is just pre-scientific nonsense—though of course their skepticism is a philosophical opinion, not a scientific one, since science cannot prove or disprove any of this. But if the kingdom of heaven is real, as Jesus says over and over again; and if those who claim to have met the risen Lord are not simply lying or delusional; and if the countless thousands of people who claim to have had some deeply meaningful experience at the edge of ordinary reality are telling the truth, then all these claims are at least consistent with the Christian notion of the kingdom of heaven.

What difference does it make? Some people, even some religious folk, think this it's all just speculation anyway, and they're content to live this life by the values of this world,

as if the kingdom of heaven, even if it was real, had little or nothing to do with life here and now. But that's enormously shortsighted. In fact, if heaven is real it makes all the difference in this world too, because heaven, and possibly hell, is not far from any of us, and what we do here and now is judged and gains eternal significance, not by the standards of this world, but by the standards of heaven.

It makes a difference because people's lives are transformed when they start to live more fully in the thin places between this world and the next. They're not afraid to die any more, and they're not afraid to live more fully either, in the fullness of life that Jesus describes. They tend to be more loving and compassionate and generous toward other people, because those are the values of heaven; while the values of this world, in all its egocentricity and insecurity and fear, seem so petty and trivial by comparison.

Materialists imagine that this world of concrete things is what's real and anything else is imaginary, but if people who have been to the thin places are right, then something like the opposite is true. The kingdom of heaven has, in some ways, an even deeper, greater reality than this world. That idea is very old, by the way. Plato talked about the realm of ideals, the essence of things, and he thought this world was only a kind of shadowy approximation of that reality. C. S. Lewis thought something like that was true too, and he imagines people going to heaven, in a little fantasy book called *The Great Divorce*, where the very grass of heaven seems to pierce their feet—not in a way that's painful, but in a way that simply feels more real.

Those who have spent any time at all in the thin places of this world know that things are not always as they seem to the untrained eye. Many of the things that matter

most to worldly people turn out to be transient, and in that sense less real, while the less material qualities of life, like the habits of a loving heart, prove to be more real because they belong to the kingdom of heaven, the realm that never passes away.

The notion of thin places in this world is not all that hard to imagine, even if you've never experienced it directly. Analogies are always poor and inadequate, but I'm reminded of this whenever I see some old sweater wearing thin at the elbows, and it's letting in more light and air than it's supposed to—which means that the sweater itself is having its own kind of near-death experience. We've all been in a dark room, where someone pulls back the heavy drapes and all of a sudden light comes pouring in from outside. There may be some thin curtain behind the draperies that keeps us from seeing clearly outside, and a window may still separate us from what's out there, but pulling back the draperies not only lets us see what lies beyond these walls but also helps us to see more clearly to move about the room we're in.

Living in the thin places of this world is something like that, only vastly more meaningful and important. If we really believe that the kingdom of heaven has come near, and especially if we've felt it from time to time ourselves—through prayers that are answered; or the still, small voice of the Spirit whispering just the words we need to hear; or some more dramatic time when heaven itself seemed to open up to us, if only for a moment—then our whole lives will be lived more richly and fully here and now. The more we live in the thin places of this world, the more we know the other reality that is never far from us, and the more that reality brings us hope and courage and comfort peace, even before we fully enter into it at last.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org