

"UNCONCEALING THE GATE OF HEAVEN"
June 22, 2014

THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF SALISBURY, U.C.C.

The Rev. Eileen L. Epperson

Genesis 28:10-17, Matthew 10:24-33

I returned yesterday from eight days in Detroit where I was a Commissioner to the 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, PCUSA for short. I have been a Presbyterian minister for over 24 years and have been to one other General Assembly seeing the wider church in action. That was 14 years ago. I have had a revelation this week about the wider church and how my denomination gets things done and I am thrilled.

The General Assembly is a deliberative body of the national denomination occurs every two years. Commissioners are randomly assigned to a committee which meets for 2½ days to hammer out overtures or resolutions calling for actions or statements by various Presbyterian agencies and recommendations to be sent to presbyteries around the country. When we reconvened in plenary and heard the reports of 15 committees, we worked 13-15 hours every day. I am a little tired.

General Assembly is comparable to the U.C.C. General Synod. The next General Synod will be June 26-30, 2015 in Cleveland, Ohio. The U.C.C. website reads: "At General Synod 30, we will lift up all of the 'Unexpected Places' we find (and hear) God, and the places where we find church. And all of the unexpected places where we find the United Church of Christ lifting up its witness in the world."

I urge you to make plans now for a group to go from this church. You would return home with a deeper appreciation for your denomination and what it is doing and how it makes decisions. And you would be proud, I promise you, and enlarge the context in which this particular church functions.

I returned yesterday full and satisfied after eight days of exhilarating debate imbued throughout with generosity, kindness and extraordinary organization and planning. And hundreds of volunteers in teal aprons who greeted me at the airport, throughout the week right up to directing me to the bus to come home. I have a fresh, deep appreciation for my denomination and its unique governance structure.

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It was a daily feast of Robert's Rules, discussions, amendments and voting on a myriad number of issues around social justice, climate concerns, racial discrimination in voter suppression, gun control, policies on supplier diversity (which companies the church uses for various services). Restructuring church councils and international peacemaking were up for discussion, to name a few. As with most conferences I attend, I have returned with pens, magnets, many papers and brochures, a large red balloon (deflated), cell phone stands, magnets, a CD of sermons on stewardship, a flash drive with information about ministering to the disabled, and did I mention magnets?

I also return with a heart and mind bursting with information, relationships and very moving testimonies by Jews, Palestinians, and ecumenical church partners from Hungary, Sri Lanka, and South America. I was part of all of this. I was part of making significant statements and decisions on behalf of my church. A most humbling week. I say, 'it was heaven.'

I have been counting my blessing each day for three weeks as a new practice to open my eyes. There were so many blessings this week and many gates to heaven in surprising places and moments.

Jacob exclaims: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

Surely, there is not one access to heaven, whatever we mean by heaven. What do we actually mean when we say 'heaven?'

Whatever you mean. My own characterization, at least for now, is something like this: heaven is a realm of being open such that everything is seen as an expression of God. Or this: the felt presence of goodness, unmerited kindness, beauty and wholeness.

How do you find one of those gates to goodness and love, sweet moments, clarity, compassion? Maybe you need to go to sleep and have a dream that reveals God. I do not say that glibly. My senior thesis at Union Seminary in New York City was original research using interviews with seminary students about night dreams they had had that they experienced as healing in some fashion. It was an amazing journey for me and a gift to those I interviewed because I listened to their stories. I got a **DISTINCTION** on the thesis. God speaks in dreams throughout the Old and New Testament, and, I dare say, does so still. God is still speaking in dreams.

When he awakens, Jacob declares that the gate of heaven was right where he slept on his journey to find a wife. He didn't choose a place to rest *because* it was glowing or had a sign: **Gate to Heaven Here**. He was most likely preoccupied with protecting himself from wild animals and feeling guilt

and fear about having just stolen his brother's blessing from their father (in the previous chapter.)

Jacob discovered it was already sacred after he picked it. It was unconcealed for him. He woke up to something that was literally underneath him.

Where is the gate of heaven? Here. If heaven, that is whatever you mean by heaven, is not right here and right now, in your very breath...where else is heaven to be found?

You think, I love this church and this sanctuary and perhaps you have been in it hundreds of times. But a gate to heaven? Heaven, here?

Or perhaps you are not feeling the joy you are sure is part of being in the realm of heaven. You are still feeling the sadness you felt when you walked in. Nothing has changed with your daughter's situation and your best friend is still sick. You don't see any angels going up and down any ladder.

How can you get out of your own way to see the gate when it is right in front of you? I offer three suggestions in order of importance:

1. You have to ask Jesus to lend you his heart and his eyes, to train you to see what is under and around you *all the time*. You can do that right now, as I am speaking. It is just a slight turning of the heart in his direction and a whispered prayer.

2. You can train yourself to look for the Kingdom of God: counting blessings, a gratitude journal, and notes of appreciation. I started working with a blessing program I got online and I have been starting every day counting ten blessings. I have been doing this for three weeks and I can tell you, my heart is opening and I am literally seeing things I have never seen before. I am so grateful for the thousands of people who paved the miles of roads I drive on, put down the street signs, the speed limit signs and the telephone poles. And I really feel it again now as I say it.

3. Listen. Listen to the person you are catching up with in a few minutes over coffee. Listen to those children and youth this summer, especially the angry ones. The ones who don't know how to join in. They will un-conceal a gate of heaven if you listen with your whole being. And you will find that **"nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing is secret that will not become known."**

So, access to the gates of heaven, whatever you mean by heaven ~

Asking Jesus to lend you his heart and eyes to see what he sees; taking up a daily practice of noticing the gifts in your life, training yourself to appreciate

what is already in and around you at every moment; committing yourself daily to receive another person in their integrity by listening keenly.

I end with the words from our Call to Worship:

Come, walk with God in these moments of worship. Celebrate God's covenant with us and all humankind. Surely God is in this place today. We find refuge and strength as we gather. Be still and know that God is God. All our names for God are limited metaphors. The Most High lives in us and among us. The whole universe is God's dwelling place.

AMEN