

### *On Life Now and Then: Charlie Quick*

**Psalm 103:1-2, 8-17a** Let my whole being bless the LORD! Let everything inside me bless his holy name! <sup>2</sup> Let my whole being bless the LORD and never forget all his good deeds:

<sup>8</sup> The LORD is compassionate and merciful, very patient, and full of faithful love. <sup>9</sup> God won't always play the judge; he won't be angry forever. <sup>10</sup> He doesn't deal with us according to our sin or repay us according to our wrongdoing, <sup>11</sup> because as high as heaven is above the earth, that's how large God's faithful love is for those who honor him. <sup>12</sup> As far as east is from west-- that's how far God has removed our sin from us. <sup>13</sup> Like a parent feels compassion for their children-- that's how the LORD feels compassion for those who honor him. <sup>14</sup> Because God knows how we're made, God remembers we're just dust. <sup>15</sup> The days of a human life are like grass: they bloom like a wildflower; <sup>16</sup> but when the wind blows through it, it's gone; even the ground where it stood doesn't remember it. <sup>17</sup> But the LORD's faithful love is from forever ago to forever from now for those who honor him.

**1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 53-55** So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. <sup>43</sup> It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. <sup>44</sup> It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.

<sup>53</sup> For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. <sup>54</sup> When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." <sup>55</sup> "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

**Revelation 21:1-4** Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

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Just a week ago we said good-bye to Ginny James, who some of us had known for over forty years. The next day, Charlie Quick died. Charlie began to worship with us a few years ago and we didn't have the time to get to know him as deeply. He was a small, quiet man who visited for several weeks. Gradually he opened up to us as he began to settle into this community of faith. He began to sing in the choir and he met with the Session to add his name to the official roll of First Pres. He really enjoyed being in the choir and he sang in the cantata that the choir offered on Maundy Thursday. Because so many of his friends in the choir will be out of the country for a while, we will remember Charlie this morning.

Here are some facts about Charlie, some learned only recently. He served in the Navy, graduating from both Radar School and the Naval School of Music. He played the trombone and enjoyed playing Dixieland music. He also loved classical music and would have it playing while he enjoyed another passion of his, reading.

His parents never graduated from high school, but Charlie found great joy in learning. He got a B.A. from St. Andrews, a Master's from Appalachian State, and a PhD from the University of South Carolina. Over the years he taught in colleges in Florida and North and South Carolina. When Charlie was thirty, his father died. Four years later, he dropped his mother off at her home. Thirty minutes later she was murdered by the son of a family friend. Charlie was especially close to his sister, Dorothy. But in the 90s she died of cancer and he took her death hard. Despite the tragedies in his life, Charlie did not become bitter. He remained a gentle soul who was rarely angry and never vicious.

Charlie lived simply. He walked where he could and took the bus if it was going where he needed to go. Dan would give him a ride to and from choir rehearsal. Twig gave him a lift for Sunday school and worship. Sometimes Charlie would have his camera with him, capturing special moments and friends, then later sharing prints with folks. We knew he had cancer and that it would always be with him. We worried when he fell and hurt his back. We celebrated with him when he got dentures and could eat solid food again. And when you talked with Charlie, two things were quickly apparent. He was smart and well-spoken. His PhD in English shone through in little, gentle ways. And he had an easy way with self-deprecating humor. Charlie was always ready to laugh at himself.

We also knew that he was alone. His best friend in recent years died a year or so ago. He hadn't had any contact with his family for ten years. We became his family. He loved us and we loved him. Charlie was 74 when he died last Sunday night. The final tragedy in his life was that he and his family never sought to reconcile. Neither made the first move, the tentative note or phone call. Brothers and sisters, Paul tells us that we are all called to a ministry of reconciliation. That includes you and me. That includes our relationships with our families and friends from the past.

As we say good-bye to Charlie, we would do well to reflect not only on life here and now, but also on life to come.

Genesis tells us that God made us, male and female, in God's own image. And as Voltaire commented, ever since then, we have tried to make God in our image. In some ways, that's a result of our human limitations. We have a hard time imagining anything that we haven't seen, touched, heard, or otherwise experienced in some way. Centuries before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah (55:8-9) proclaimed that God's ways aren't the same as our ways and God's thoughts aren't the same as ours. We nod our head in agreement, but we can't seem to wrap our mind around how that plays out. Today's reading from Psalm 103 proclaims that God "doesn't deal with us according to our sin or repay us according to our wrongdoing." Really? Most of us can't imagine how that could possibly be true. The Psalmist goes on to say that the LORD's faithful love is from forever in the past to forever in the future, from everlasting to everlasting. There's an old hymn about the "love that will not let me go." But as soon as we make a mistake or when something bad happens to us, we're inclined to think God's love has let go of us and now God's wrath has a grip on us. We confuse ourselves by thinking that we have to be worthy, and then fret that we are not worthy.

It isn't just God's character that we assume is like ours. We describe and portray God as a bearded older man with legs and arms. Scripture speaks of God's ear, mighty arm, God's nostrils, but also God's wings (Deuteronomy 32:11). We never picture God with wings.

In the same way that we picture God as being much like us, we also do the same thing to heaven. When someone dies, we picture them continuing their favorite activities in heaven. Uncle Bert must be sitting under a tree with a fishing line in a heavenly fishing hole. Aunt Betsy has joined the alto section of the heavenly choir, etc.. We picture heaven as a perfect version of our life here. Perhaps, in our desire to know what heaven is like, we fill in the gaps left by what scripture tells us. In fact, scripture tells us less than we think it does. We picture the pearly gates as a double gate with Peter sitting at a desk just outside the gates. And we're sure that the streets are paved with gold. But Revelation 21:21 says that there are twelve gates and each gate is a single pearl. It also says that the street is paved with transparent gold. Obviously, the language here is meant to be poetic or metaphorical.

Our arrival time in heaven is not well defined. In Luke 16, Jesus tells the story of Lazarus and the rich man. Lazarus, the suffering beggar dies and goes to heaven. The selfish rich man goes to hell. This seems to happen immediately after death because the rich man wants to send a message back to his brothers to warn them to change their ways. But in Matthew 25, Jesus tells of a final judgment at the end of time when people will be sorted according to how they lived their lives and then sent to their

eternal destination. So, does one go to heaven or hell immediately – or at some later time of judgment? I don't know. I wish I did. On the other hand, does it really matter?

We often speak of being united with dearly loved husbands or wives or other family members who died before us. In Matthew 22 (25-32) Jesus is asked about a woman who outlived each of seven husbands and then she died. Whose wife would she be after the resurrection? Jesus replied that in the resurrection people neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. For those who lived in troubled marriages, that sounds like good news. But what about those who deeply loved their spouse and missed them terribly? What do they have to look forward to?

Scripture is not so ambiguous about some things. In today's reading from Paul's letter to the Christians in Corinth, he tells them that we get a new body, not a mortal, faulty, perishable body, but an imperishable spiritual body. That's wonderful news! No matter when or how one dies, that's a big improvement. And for those who have been handicapped physically, those who have suffered some degenerative disease, and those who have been racked with pain, this sounds especially good.

Our text from the book of Revelation tells of a new city of God descending to earth and God coming to be with us. Just as God has pursued us all the days of our lives, so God will dwell with mortals. Every pain, every sorrow will disappear. There will be no more crying and mourning. That sounds absolutely fantastic!

So what little we are told about heaven sounds . . . well . . . heavenly. What about hell? If your main reason for "being good" is that you're afraid that you'll go to hell, then you aren't very motivated by your love for God, nor do you have very much faith in God's love for you. Think about this clearly. If you're trying to behave, if you're worried about whether you believe the "right" beliefs because you are worried about hell, then you haven't paid attention to how much God loves you, how God has persistently reached out to you, how God's love is steadfast and extravagant. And failure to recognize God's love for us leaves us with little motivation to respond gratefully in love and service to God.

In John's gospel (14:1-2) Jesus tells us, "Don't be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. <sup>2</sup> My Father's house has room to spare. If that weren't the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you?" Therein lies our problem. We are troubled – troubled by wanting to know details. And we lack sufficient trust in God. We lack the experience to fully imagine how wonderful heaven will be and so we try to fill in the details with what we can imagine. Reinhold Niebuhr said, "It is unwise for Christians to want to know too much about the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell." When we fill in the details from our own desires and our imaginations, what we construct can only be a pale shadow of heaven, and perhaps a misleading picture as well. So rather than filling in the details with our paltry imagination, we are called to trust that our God who is love will greet us with a future more magnificent than we can presently comprehend!

***Let us pray.***

Lord God, we have come to believe deeply that you brought our Lord Jesus Christ back from the dead. Because that is so, we've come also to believe that through him, you prepared a place for Charlie Quick.

You've given us no clear picture of exactly what that place is like. When we think of it, to the eyes of our mind and heart, the place prepared for Charlie has a comfortable chair, a good reading light, and glorious music playing. Give him a happy reunion with those whom he loved and settle him in the place prepared for him. With our limited understanding, that seems like a heavenly place for Charlie. But Lord, we are coming to understand that the place you prepare is far better than our wildest or most sentimental dreams.

Lord God, Charlie labored long and hard with this dread disease that spread all through his body. Put his strong spirit into a new strong spiritual body. Then, Lord God, come quickly to us, bringing solace to us because the sweetness in knowing his pain has ended is made salty with the tears of our sorrow. Bless all who by birth or by marriage or by devotion are family. Bless this community of faith, your servants whose gentle touch is your gentle touch, whose kind word is your kind word, and whose strong presence is your strong presence.

Fill us with such faith in Jesus Christ that we might have confidence in the well-being of the ones we must release to your care.

Now give us all eyes to see beyond this place to a house not made with hands; then hold us all in your hands while we live the fullness of this and all our days. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our risen Savior, in whom we place our hope. Amen.

Sisters and brothers,  
God will be God, so let God be God.  
What God has in store for us is  
beyond our imagination and our comprehension.  
Live in grateful service today  
And trust in God's effusive love for the future.