

See You on the Other Side?

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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Today marks the fifth and final Sunday of our 2026 Faith Questions sermon series, the series where your questions set the preaching agenda from the time between Epiphany and Lent.

One of the things that I think nearly every year after our Faith Question series is, “You know it’s a shame that I kind of just address these questions once in a sermon and then move on.”

I could easily imagine there being follow-up questions or desires for clarification or just an opportunity to discuss further.

It’s even possible—if I really stretch the outer limits of my imagination—that there might be the occasional disagreement with what I say in these sermons! ☺ At any rate, it’s one way traffic. You ask, I try to respond.

I’ve often thought, it would be great if those who were interested had a chance to discuss some of these questions in a more informal context.

At our AGM last Saturday, we discussed options for creating spaces for connection and theological engagement. One option that bubbled up a few times around tables was related to the Faith Questions sermon series, perhaps a follow up coffee and conversation night the week after.

I’m going to think more about this in the days ahead. I do think it’s important that we have space to hear from not just me but one another on these questions. Stay tuned.

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The way I have summarized today's question is on the wall behind me: "Will we meet on the other side (and other questions of heaven?)"

I want to read the longer version of the question I actually received because I think it gives important context:

When I listen to funeral sermons and conversations, I sometimes feel uncomfortable with assumptions made about heaven, especially that those who died will meet, recognize, and spend time with their family members and friends who have died before them. I wonder where the idea of meeting again with loved ones come from.

I recently met with a person whose 5-year-old daughter passed away 25 years ago. In their mind, the daughter was still 5 years old, although she would be 30 years old by now if she had lived. What does the Bible say about children dying? Will there be young and old people in heaven, or does it even matter?

As it happens, death and dying were on my mind this week. We spent Friday and Saturday in Edmonton attending the funeral of my uncle who died somewhat unexpectedly and suddenly, despite some ongoing health challenges.

Last night when we got home, Naomi and I decided to conduct some "research" on today's topic and watched a new movie on Apple TV called "Eternity."

The premise of the show is that when you die, you get sent to "the junction" where you have to select from one of any number of potential afterlives.

It's a bit like a big airport terminal/shopping mall/hotel. All your options are laid out before you. You can spend eternity in 1960's Paris or the Rocky Mountains or an infinite buffet or an eternal high school reunion (which sounds horrifying to most people!).

There was even a "man-free" eternity for which, strangely, there was a waiting list ☺ The options are pretty much endless.

The only catch is, once you decide, there's no going back, so the decision is permanent.

Another interesting feature of the film is that each person enters the junction at the age they were the happiest at. So, there are small children, seniors and everything in between.

Most, it seems, choose to come back in their thirties ☺. The thirties aren't awesome for everyone, I know, but there's probably something about this being when many of us feel like we're at the peak of our powers or the future is still open or whatever.

Interestingly, some medieval theologians speculated that at the resurrection everyone would be the age Jesus was when he died (roughly 33). This is, I have to say, pure speculation, but interesting, nonetheless.

At any rate, the main plot line of the movie has to do with three characters. Joan and Larry have lived long lives and have been married for sixty+ years. They die within a week of each other and find each other in The Junction.

They also find a guy named Luke. Luke was Joan's first husband who died in the Korean war. Luke has been waiting in The Junction for over six decades in the hopes of reuniting with Joan and spending eternity with her.

So, the scene is set for a kind of "who will she choose?" narrative. The man she has spent sixty plus years with, created a life and a family with? Or her first love?

I won't spoil the ending for you, but the movie is an interesting exploration of some of the questions we're talking about today—questions that I suspect most of us have thought about at some point in our lives!

Even in a post-Christian culture that strives so earnestly to be secular in so many ways, the question of what, if anything, comes next, and how it relates to who we are on this side of the grave is one that almost everyone has an interest in.

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Well, let's move from Hollywood to more serious Christian reflection on these things.

Questions of death and dying often have showed up regularly in eight years of this Faith Questions series, and whenever they do, I put them at the end of the series.

I do so very intentionally. In a few days, on Ash Wednesday, we begin the season of Lent by acknowledging that death is in all our futures.

The Christian hope has always been that we are defined not by Ash Wednesday but by Easter Sunday, thanks be to God!

But death still looms large in our imaginations. We still have questions, fears, anxieties about what we *can* or *should* hope for when it comes to life after death.

When we're at funerals, does all this language about the deceased recognizing, spending time with spouses, family members, and friends who have died before them make contact with reality?

Will we recognize people on the other side? Will old relationships be resumed/maintained? Will there be young and old people in heaven? Does it even matter?

The short answer to all these questions is...

I don't know for sure. And nobody else does either.

The bible simply doesn't speak to these issues the way we would like it to. If it does, it is only in the most tenuous way.

The OT occasionally refers to those who have died being "gathered up to their ancestors" (e.g., Genesis 25:8; 35:29; 49:33).

When King David's infant son died, he said, "But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me" (1 Samuel 12:22-23).

That "I shall go to him" seems to indicate that David believed he would be reunited with his son after death.

What about the NT? Well, the parable of the Rich Man and the beggar Lazarus in Luke 16 seems to assume personal identity after death, memory of earthly relationships, and the recognition of others.

We would be surprised if a parable of Jesus' rested on a false assumption about reality, but parables are hardly detailed roadmaps of the afterlife.

When Jesus speaks about the kingdom of heaven, he does so in corporate terms, not individual: For example, in Matthew 8 he says, “Many will come... and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

Again, recognition and relationality are implied but not outright stated.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul talks about how “believers who have died will rise first, and *together* the living and the dead will be with the Lord.” That word “together” seems to imply capacities of recognition and relationship

Probably the strongest theological case for relational continuity on the other side of death comes from the resurrection of Christ.

In the gospel accounts, Jesus is the same person who died. He is recognizable, though transformed. He remembers relationships, speaks names, eats with others.

If Jesus is the firstborn of the new creation, as Scripture describes, this would seem to give us some clues that we can expect something similar, if not identical.

So, what we have are a few hints and inferences, but certainly nothing like a detailed picture of what we should expect.

And, sadly, we get nothing whatsoever when it comes to the question of whether there will be old and young people in heaven or if 33 is the magic age. ☺

I think that a biblically faithful summary could go something like this:

- Scripture clearly teaches personal continuity beyond death—we remain the same people
- Resurrection presupposes recognition and identity
- The language of comfort, gathering, and togetherness implies a kind of reunion is possible, even if this is never stated outright

But Scripture refuses to satisfy our curiosity about the specifics.

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I think we can also say that this idea of heaven as a big reunion with friends and family has kind of taken on a life of its own when it comes to how many people speak at funerals or about death more generally.

You hear a lot of fairly overconfident declarations of “they’re looking down on us” or “they’re kicking back with so-and-so” or they’re golfing a round with their old buddies” or “they’re singing in the big choir” whatever.

All of this is, I have to say, speculative.

So, where does it come from? Well, two places, I would say, one pragmatic and pastoral, the other more theological.

Obviously, people who are grieving the loss of someone they love need comfort. And so, pastors often emphasized this idea of the life to come as “reunion” to comfort the grieving.

Death and dying are vulnerable spaces, spaces of heightened emotion and confusion, moments where people are desperate for anything to give them hope and get them through the grief and the pain.

To put it bluntly, sometimes, well-meaning pastors and people more generally just say whatever they can to make people feel better.

Someone who says something like, “Uncle Charlie’s kicking back with a six-pack and a rocking chair up in the great big ranch in the sky!” isn’t really seeking theological precision. They’re trying to provide comfort by reaching for the familiar, the known, the cherished.

I understand the temptation to say whatever you can to make people feel better, but I try to resist saying things that I don’t think are true.

This brings me to the more theological grounding for the idea of the next life as a reunion with those we love.

In 1 John 4, we read, “God is love.” 1 Corinthians 13, we read “love never fails.”

I would say that if love is the nature of God, and we are made in the image of a God defined by inherent relationality (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), then death cannot destroy love or relationality.

If we were created to give and receive love in this life, created by a God who loves us and who loves all of creation, then it would make no sense for love to disappear in the life to come.

We can't think of ourselves apart from our relationships with others. We are defined by them, for better or worse. For many of us, our earthly experiences of love have been some of the deepest, most profound experiences and emotions in life.

I would not be the same person that I am today had I not spent the last 34 years of my life in a relationship with Naomi or the last twenty-five years as the father of Claire and Nicholas.

You would not be the people you are today without the relationships in your life, whether that's to a spouse or a friend or a sibling or whatever.

In many ways, we are who we are because of our relationships. We cannot think of who we are apart from them. They are not something separate from us. They are central to who we are and to how our identities are formed and shaped over our lifetimes.

Will our loves look and feel the same on the other side? Will our relationships be configured in the same way? Probably not.

For example, in a dispute with the Sadducees who asked him a question about marriage, Jesus says that marriage as we understand it will not be a feature of resurrection life.

Some might be troubled by this; others might be relieved ☺. I don't know. We should also note that the Sadducees seemed more interested in setting a legal trap for Jesus than learning or preparing for the afterlife in any kind of meaningful way, but that's another sermon.

The point is, I think that whatever is coming will fulfill and transcend our earthly loves in some way. We probably do not have the capacity or the categories to conceptualize this. How could it be otherwise?

Whatever we have experienced of genuine love this side of eternity, it will in some sense find its fulfillment, its completion, and will continue in some sense in the age to come.

The flip side is that the relationships that have harmed us or that have been a source of pain and heartache will not define us in the age to come.

The Christian hope is *not* that we will get our old lives back on the other side, or that they will be a continuation of what was good about them, but that something radically new will burst upon the scene, rendering everything we have experienced before it a pale imitation.

And we also believe that “nothing truly good and of God can be lost” in the age to come. Love never fails.

If love comes from God, it’s impossible to imagine God’s future erasing it.

So, will we see each other on the other side? Will we recognize and relate to each other? Will there be continuity between this life and the next?

Yes. But we don’t know how or what it will look like. We do know that we will all be changed. We do know that whatever this change entails, it will be a change from something that is perishable and corruptible to something that is imperishable and uncorruptible.

And that we will be caught up in a love like nothing we have ever seen or imagined. A love which all the loves we have experienced in this life will probably seem like a pale imitation of.

A love that incorporates every love we have given or received and takes it into a different register entirely.

Love is from God. Love never fails. Nothing good is lost in the end. Nothing bad retains the capacity to harm or define us. The details can be left to God.

This, I think is the Christian hope. And it is one that we should anticipate with joy, not fear or anxiety.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.