

"Heaven Gazing"
Sermon for Ascension Sunday
Lectionary Year A
May 4, 2008
Texts: Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53
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As is true of most boys, when my son, Matthew, was growing up he played little league baseball. He played for about six years in a row, so I spent a considerable amount of time sitting in bleachers. His games were a lot of fun to watch the last couple of years he played. In fact they could be extremely exciting at times. From week to week rather good hitting, pitching, and fielding could be seen and enjoyed. As Matthew and the rest of the guys on his team got a little older and more experienced, they could play baseball pretty close to the way the game is meant to be played.

But I can remember as well the first few years of Matthew's little league career, when he was about eight or nine years old and playing an entirely different brand of game. So during those early years my favorite thing to do at Matthew's games was to watch the outfielders. For the most part, eight or nine year old outfielders are not paying attention. They are not really in the game. They are somewhere else mentally and sometimes physically as well. More often than not, they are preoccupied, distracted, and pretty much clueless as to what is happening closer to the plate.

If you have watched that age group play baseball, you know what I mean. Outfielders of that age in particular are off in Neverland, and no

one knows it better than their coaches. That's why you hear them yelling toward the outfield: "Pay attention. Quit playing in the grass. Stop watching the other field. Don't wave to your little brother at the snack bar. Put your glove back on. Be ready. Keep your eyes on the batter. The ball's coming to you."

It must be the same everywhere, a universal phenomenon. Little league outfielders are always in another world. I recall an installment of *Peanuts* in which Lucy, the matron saint of little league outfielders, stands there while a fly ball drops right behind her. Charlie Brown, beginning at the pitcher's mound and running out toward her, yells to Lucy, "AAUGH!! Not again! Can't you catch anything? How could you miss it?!" As he kicks his glove, Charlie Brown continues, "You're the worst player in the history of the game!" While stomping on his hat in rage, he adds, "You're going to drive me crazy!!!" And throwing up his hands in despair, Charlie Brown exclaims, "How can you be so bad?!" Lucy looks around and asks, "Are you talking to me?"

Like many little league outfielders, Lucy's mind is on other things. And we who have done our share of sitting in the stands know what happens when outfielders' heads are not in the game, when they are busy doing something else, when they are not paying attention to their assigned positions and roles—fly balls are missed, batters make extra bases, runners score, teams lose. And little league outfielders stand there with a look that asks, "How in the world did that happen?"

When Jesus ascended into heaven, what was the first tendency of the disciples? According to the narrative from the first chapter of *Acts*, the disciples' first tendency after Jesus' ascension was to act like

little league outfielders. And those disciples also got caught by their coaches, otherwise known as the men in white robes, who said to the disciples, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

The disciples were heaven gazing, and the men in white, probably angels, gently chided Jesus' followers for it. Heaven gazing is like what little league outfielders often are caught doing. It is being preoccupied; it is not having your head in the game; it is being distracted; it is not paying attention to what you are supposed to be doing; it is losing your focus. I want to suggest that we, as modern-day disciples of Christ, are no less prone to heaven gazing than those first disciples were.

There are many ways a church can be guilty of heaven gazing, of being preoccupied and thus distracted. It seems to me that some churches are engaged in heaven gazing because they are preoccupied with political issues and social concerns. Other churches are preoccupied by arguing over theological issues, such as biblical authority or predestination or eschatology, the understanding of the end-times. Other churches are distracted by arguments over orthodoxy. Still others are distracted by arguments over how best to worship God—in a traditional way, in a contemporary way, or in a combination of both. Heaven gazing comes in all shapes and sizes and is not limited to one denomination or faith tradition.

I am most concerned, however, about one particular way a local congregation can be guilty of heaven gazing: *by focusing too much on itself*. Ecclesiastical myopia is heaven gazing. We can become preoccupied with meeting our own needs. We can plan programs only for ourselves, enjoy fellowship only among ourselves, minister only to the

concerns we have. The purpose of the local church easily can become the entertaining and caretaking of its members. We lose ourselves to heaven gazing when we become simply a social club, a support group, or a preservation society. *We're heaven gazing when church becomes all about us.*

Make no mistake about it. Such heaven gazing *is* a problem. It's a problem because it keeps us from doing what Christ commissioned his followers to do. Heaven gazing is wrong to the extent that it distracts us and causes us to focus our attention away from the task to which we have been called. A preoccupation with ourselves and our agendas is a concern when it prevents us from doing with our faith what Jesus insisted we do. And what is that?

Look again at these two passages of scripture, the one from Acts and the one from Luke. In both Jesus tells his followers that they are to proclaim in his name that repentance and forgiveness of sins are available to all people. His followers are to witness concerning him to the ends of the earth. And the power they would receive, the power of the Holy Spirit, would be sent in order to help them accomplish this mission.

The mission of the Church is evangelism. Please understand that. *The mission of the Church is evangelism.* That is what we are to be concerned about first and foremost, primarily, ahead of all other things. It is to be our top priority, the first item on our agenda as a congregation. We as followers of Christ are to share with others—our family members, our friends, our neighbors, our colleagues—the good news of what a relationship with Christ has done for us. That's the essence of evangelism. You don't have to be a theologian to do that. You

don't have to be a biblical scholar to do that. You don't have to have been a lifelong Methodist to do that. You certainly don't have to be a pastor to do that. Anyone can do it, and everyone is called to do it. All you have to do is be willing to tell others what having faith in Christ through the life of the church has contributed, has added, has made a difference in your life.

In a world that is constantly changing, that is more unstable and unpredictable than it ever has been, we are called by God to say to our family members, our friends, our neighbors, and our colleagues, "I have found strength, support, empowerment, and comfort in my faith. I have discovered my identity and realized my value and worth as a person through my faith. I have experienced genuine community because of my faith. I have learned appropriate boundaries as a part of my growth in faith. My relationships have been enhanced because of my faith. I have experienced healing as a result of my faith. My life is not less difficult, but it is more full of joy, of grace, of peace, and of hope because of my faith." That is witnessing to your faith. That is evangelism.

And what if we aren't involved in evangelism? What if we continue to be content with heaven gazing and maintain our preoccupation with ourselves and our concerns? The same thing will happen to us that happens to little league outfielders. Except it won't be fly balls that are missed; it will be people. Without our witness, people—family members, friends, neighbors, colleagues—may miss the opportunity to experience what the grace of God can do in their lives. And we will be standing around with a look on our faces that asks, "How in the world did that happen?"

The angels in white are waiting outside our door, and they are saying to us, "Why are you heaven gazing? Why are you preoccupied with your agendas? Why have you allowed yourselves to become distracted? Why have you lost your focus on the mission of the Church? Go and do what Jesus commanded. Be his witnesses—beginning here and extending to wherever else you may be. Be his witnesses in your family life, at your work, at school, at play. And as you do, the power of the Holy Spirit will come upon you."