The “We-ness” of Our Destiny
(Isaiah 65:17-25)

A man arrives at the gates of heaven. St. Peter, glancing over his reading glasses asks, “Denomination?” The man says, “Methodist.”

St. Peter looks down his list and says, “Go to Room 24, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8.”

Another man arrives at the gates. “Denomination?”

“Lutheran.”

“Fine. Go to Room 18, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8.” A third man gets to the gates. “Denomination?”

“Episcopalian.” “Go to Room 11, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8.”

The Episcopalian says, “You know, I suppose I can understand there being different rooms for different denominations, but why do I have to be quiet when I pass Room 8?”

St. Peter says, “Well, the Baptists are in Room 8, and they think they’re the only people here.”

Now please don’t take this as a jab at our Baptist sisters and brothers. Unfortunately, the reality is that the denominations can be pretty interchangeable in this little story. But there’s a point to this. (Maybe more than one point.) And that is that Jesus calls us to think differently than this. There is no “us and them” in Christ’s body the church. Only “us”.

Last week was ingathering week, and we looked at what we at Hope are accomplishing together as community, along with our need to keep working together on the joy-filled works he has for us as we collectively celebrate and share God’s gift of salvation. This morning I’d like to go a step deeper into that concept of Christian community, and show that our faith is not an individual thing (or even an intramural competition), but a “we” thing.

In fact I’ve titled this talk “The We-ness of Our Destiny”. Now, “we-ness” is a made up word; you won’t find it in your Dictionary of Christian Theology. And the “we” in we-ness has only one “e”. It’s not about the tininess of our destiny. “We-ness” might best be explained by offering a contrast. Many of us, having lived in America our whole lives, may be a little blind to the fact that this place and its people all around us colors our perceptions of a lot of things.

And one long-recognized American trait that we “live within” is the spirit of what’s been called “rugged individualism”. It’s a deep enthusiasm for one of the fruits of freedom, which is our independence and self-reliance. But when individualism becomes our main driving force, some unforeseen problems can appear.

As far back as the 1830’s this was foretold by Alexis de Tocqueville, who envisions what he calls
“an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives. Each of them, living apart, is as a stranger to the fate of all the rest. His children and his private friends constitute to him the whole of mankind. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, he is close to them, but he does not see them; he touches them, but he does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone; and if his kindred still remain to him, he may be said at any rate to have lost his country.”

In his excellent book *The Second Mountain*, journalist David Brooks points out that, when human beings put their own likes and preferences above all else, their sense of fulfillment decreases. So our obsession with self-fulfillment has paradoxically created a lot of lonely and alienated selves. Brooks says that such people find out the hard way that success in and of itself does not produce happiness. And he even observes that seeking happiness for its own sake ends up not producing it, but disillusionment instead.

And here’s the thing: when people feel lonely or isolated, the reflex is to seek out likeminded people to reinforce their beliefs, and often to scapegoat people they see as threats to their beliefs. That’s the genesis of tribalism, which is the opposite of what our Lord wants for us. Brooks calls tribalism “the dark twin of community.” It’s a counterfeit. Instead of trying to understand each other, and work together with each other to solve those problems that produce suffering, enemy camps form, and fear, anger and hate are the result.

I think it’s not at all hard to identify this pattern in our own time. We’ve divided into opposing, hostile teams, and forgotten how to work together, and break bread together, and recognize our commonality in this fragile and fallen world we live in. If human society continues to fragment, and to turn inward, and to circle the wagons against our perceived enemies, frankly the rest of the 21st century promises to be a pretty rough go.

So, what does that have to do with us? Well, two things come to mind: First, Jesus has something to say about all this. In fact Jesus has the answer to all of this. Jesus is the answer. And second, this life is kind of like a long bike ride with training wheels. It prepares us for some pretty amazing and beautiful journeys in the new heavens and the new earth, which Jesus himself will one day usher in. Jesus’s answer to these problems is a forever thing, thanks be to God!

So let’s talk first about Jesus’s answer. Jesus knows human nature. He knows what cowers in the dark corners of our hearts. When he was on this earth he personally experienced violence, decadence, persecution, and the tyranny of one of the most powerful empires in history. He knew tribalism and conflict. He knew hate, and he knew it very well.

And what did he teach us about these? Well, he taught us how to fight like the dickens and beat those suckers? And barring that, he taught us to band together and escape
this madness by separating ourselves from all those bad people. He taught us take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and to make sure you love your own tribe, and to give it to our enemies with both barrels. Right?

No!! Jesus taught this: He said, “You’ve heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. You’ve heard it said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

Loving your enemies: an admittedly tall order.

Why do we love our enemies and pray for our persecutors? Well, St. Paul explains a big part of the reason. In his first letter to Timothy he writes: “[God] desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all.” One mediator who gave himself as a ransom for all. And guess who are the bearers of this news to the world.

Now, have you ever tried to give anyone a gift with a closed fist? How did that work out? You kind of end up dropping the gift, right? But when we receive Jesus’s gift of grace, he commands us to share that gift of grace, that gift of love, with others. To spread the good news to the world. It’s an act of love. And it’s hard to show credible love for someone you’re shooting at, either literally or figuratively.

And within the church itself, enmity is that much more destructive, since, in John 17, Jesus prayed to the Father that we all be one as a witness to the world that the Son was sent in love by the Father, to save humanity from sin and death. “Father, make them one as we are one.”

The answer to our inward-turned, fear-based, self-centered tribalism that tempts each of us is, to exercise sacrificial love and forgiveness, just as Jesus taught us to do, and just as Jesus did for us. And through his gift of the Holy Spirit, if we place ourselves under his reign, we receive the love and the power to succeed in both of our commissions: (1) unity within the church, and (2) spreading the good news of Jesus to the whole world. And we do so as a body, not as isolated individuals.

The second aspect of our “we-ness” is this: As I said earlier, this life is like a bike ride with training wheels. It trains us for our life together in the new heavens and the new earth. But we don’t ride alone. We ride in a great, motley, and joyous pack, which we call the church. The Greek word is ecclesía. And at its most basic, ecclesia means community.

We’re a splendidly colorful pack made up of different genders, nationalities, colors and cultures. We pedal together, we stop and eat together, we support each other, we wait for stragglers (no child of God left behind), and we encourage each other. We even pull
some in those little bike trailers. We don't necessarily give unsolicited commands on exactly how those around us should pedal, because they all have different kinds of bodies and different natural capabilities. Our Teacher and Leader takes care of that.

Now, metaphors are imperfect, of course. None of this is to imply that we have to pedal our way, or work our way, to our destination. Our destination is a gift. The new heavens and new earth is ours for the price of faith and baptism. Through the work of Jesus we’re already citizens of this destination. Yet we find ourselves pedaling together on a grateful journey to serve the Lord and to spread good news, as he instructed us to do. It can be hard at times, but it’s a journey of joy, with a lot of great scenery along the way.

Well, I’d like to close with some ancient testimony to this timeless message in our Isaiah reading. God gave him a vision of it around 2700 years ago. And Jesus gave John a post-resurrection vision of it in the book of Revelation. Both call it “the new heavens and the new earth.” Not some place in a galaxy far, far away, but right here, in a transformed creation. A new earth united with heaven. A beautiful, perfect, vibrant new home that never decays.

Isaiah also refers to this new place as “Jerusalem”, and as the “sacred mountain”. These are real places on this earth, but since New Testament times they’re seen to represent the great, holy “promised land” that awaits the faithful. It’s a place where God fully comes to live with his people.

Isaiah says it’s a place where they’ll be no more tears, and no more distress. Death will forever be “defanged”. No longer will infants die; no longer will life be cut short. It’s a place where prosperity and fruitfulness reign. “They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit,” he says. “My chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain.”

The new heavens and the new earth will be a place of perpetual peace. “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” I love the prophetic poetry here. The images of fierce animals now living in harmony. And the serpent, God’s enemy, the tempter and tormentor, no longer able to hurt or destroy God’s good creatures.

These all point forward 1700 years to the God-Man Jesus of Nazareth, and to his life, death, resurrection, ascension and return to fulfill these words of prophecy by ushering in the new heavens and the new earth. It all folds together.

And here’s the thing: in each reference to the people inhabiting this place, never is a singular pronoun used. Because it’s not a bunch of isolated individuals, like hermits on the holy mountain privately enjoying the fruits of grace, but a great community of the redeemed. This is the “we-ness” of our destiny. For all our present imperfections, annoyances and differences, we’ll all be guests at the banquet. And when the tables are
set and the great, golden lover of our souls takes his place at the head table, all our differences will disappear in a sea of eternal joy.

In the mean time we have training wheels. In God’s power we endeavor to practice loving, forgiving fellowship right now. We’re community, and we’ll continue to be community forever and ever. I don’t know about you, but I really enjoy my partners in the pack. So what say we keep right on enjoying each other’s company on the bike ride, and invite a few more share the joy! Amen.