



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

A whole man, an undamaged man, that was the person Liz and I met there in Springfield. Whole because Dick Riley's capacity for caring was intact.

"This is my commandment," Jesus says, "that you love one another" (John 15:12 RSV). This is the common currency of heaven.



The Sandwich Board

For some, this *agape* love is as natural as breathing. I'm married to one of them. One of his mother's favorite stories was about the day John, age six, asked her to do the lettering for a sandwich board he'd constructed. The wording on both chest and back, he instructed, was to be the same:

THIS BOY HELPS PEOPLE.

For weeks, his mother recalled, John walked up and down the sidewalk, displaying this announcement and performing small services for obliging neighbors.

This boy still helps people -- friends, casual acquaintances, total strangers. A stranger, to John, is a friend he hasn't met yet. I'll leave our table at a restaurant in some town where we've never been, be gone five minutes, and come back to find another chair pulled up, John and a "really interesting guy" in rapt conversation.

Bag Lady

My father, though he'd have denied it, was another lover of people. He saw himself as a hard-boiled New York detective, inured to sad stories. Panhandlers'

tales in particular. "Dropping money in a cup won't help anyone. Give someone a handout, you make him an emotional cripple." Yet he was incapable of passing a beggar without reaching into his pocket.

There was a bag lady whose chosen corner was Vanderbilt Avenue and 43rd Street, a block from his office. How Daddy discovered that her shoe size was the same as mine I never knew. Scarves, sweaters, mittens, all of us in the family were accustomed to see these appropriated for "someone who needs this." But shoes! I had to hide my cherished pair of loafers from Daddy's sudden raids on behalf of a charity he didn't know he possessed.

But what if we don't possess it? What if, like me, a person is not instinctively outgoing? I don't have the unconscious generosity of my father. John's indiscriminating goodwill toward everyone he meets. How can I accept the gift of heaven, unequipped to live there?

JOE

It was to Joe Bishop, that most loving man, that I took this question. In his study at the Presbyterian church he pastored in Rye, New York, I confessed my lifelong pattern of pulling away from people. When I wanted a break from the typewriter, I told him, I'd head off on my own. Drive to a bird sanctuary. Go to a museum.

"I don't ask anyone else along. Just do my own selfish thing." What puzzled me, I went on, was that I had friends I loved doing things with. Why did I need to be by myself when I could have a great time with others and give them pleasure too? "I've tried and tried to change, but I can't seem to."

"And why," asked Joe, "do you want to change?"

Well, because ... wasn't it obvious? "It's not loving! Look at John. Look at you."

"But we're looking at you, Tib. Do you think when God created you, he meant to make someone else?"

Joe had known me for many years, he reminded me. "I observed long ago that solitude is as necessary for you, Tib, as food and drink. Why not thank God for feeding you in this way?"

The withdrawing, the closed door that I'd struggled against all my life, was ... okay? God-given, in fact? It was one of those heaving moments when in the mirror of someone else's eyes we catch sight of a better self than we knew:

I was in fact, Joe insisted, a profound lover of people-"in your way, not John's or mine." Me? Whose self-image was of a standoffish person -- / cared deeply for others?

Like Dad Sherrill seeing a beauty that came from himself, Joe's portrait of me, I suspect, was largely a projection of his own nature. But that too is a hint of heaven! Perhaps God too sees us through the lens of his character, not ours.

Key to the Kingdom

I knew only, that day as I left Joe's study, that I was holding one of the keys to the kingdom of heaven. The lock does not open to prayer or good deeds or any other effort of our own.

The key is self-acceptance.

I can accept myself -- delight in myself -- because I am God's creation. It's a message I still have difficulty absorbing. Maybe its full impact must wait for the heaven that lies before us. But since that day in Joe's study, I've known that we cannot walk this Way at anyone else's pace, in anyone else's style, no matter how admirable. We can enter heaven only as ourselves.

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