

*“Profitcy”*

*Acts 1:1-11, Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21*

*Ascension Sunday, May 12, 2013*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

*Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

Three people die and meet St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. To the first St. Peter says, “According to my report, you’ve led an exemplary life, never in trouble with the law, no major sins, faithful in marriage, a model church and community member. Welcome to heaven.”

To the second person St. Peter says, “My report says you’ve led a basically good life but you were involved in some mischief as a young person. You can go into heaven but first you’ll have to spend some time in purgatory to repent.” Off they head to purgatory.

St. Peter’s brow furrows as he says to the last person, “Hmmm, this doesn’t look good. You’ve had a troubled life...broke into a store, stole a car, got into a fistfight with your neighbor. Marital fidelity doesn’t list high. You’ll have to be in purgatory a long time to repent.” The third person starts off when St. Peter stops him saying, “Hey, wait a second, is that a Mets jacket you’re wearing?” “Yes,” comes the reply. “You a Mets fan?” “Yes,” sighs the person. “Forget it,” St. Peter says. “Just go right into heaven. You’ve been through enough already.”

Well, who knows? Surprisingly, a lot of people want you to think they know who’s “in” and who’s “out” of the heavenly selection process. The preoccupation of others generates big religious bucks, which is why I’ve title this message “Profitcy,” misspelling the Biblical “prophecy” that speaks of end times and final judgments.

The book of Revelation from which much of this speculation comes, was written by John of Patmos (not the Gospel writer). He was imprisoned for his faith on the Aegean island of Patmos and wrote his vision to exhort Christians in Asia Minor (today’s Turkey) to increased faithfulness at a time of great persecution. To keep the persecuting authorities from understanding it, it was written in a code long-lost. We know “Babylon” is Rome; that the Romans are persecuting the church;

that the number 6 is incomplete and the number 7 is complete, so that the beast which destroys has the number 666 emblazoned on his head, and there are seven churches. But many of the images are not only mysterious but unable to be decoded.

That doesn't stop some Christians from literal interpretation, however. Of all the millions of faithful throughout the ages, they truly believe there will be only 144,000 elect of God at the final judgment, a judgment that will come in an instant called "the Rapture." This is the reference in the bumper sticker that says "In case of Rapture, this car will be unmanned." The owner truly believes they are one of the chosen 144,000. For the light hearted, there is also the bumper sticker that says, "In case of Rapture, may I have your car?" While I agree with them that there will be a final judgment, many of us would be far more likely to concur with Jesus that "about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (Mark 13:32).

All harmless enough except that it is also big business. Prophecy has become profit. Over 50 million copies of the "Left Behind" books series were sold, along with CD's and a kid's series of 26 books. There is a website, too, that will tell you if you are living in the end times. It only costs \$44.95—a month! No matter the world event, the *Left Behind* franchise has an answer. All it takes is a credit card.

Cynical? Perhaps. More importantly, sometimes criminal. 20 years ago the head of 200 Protestant churches in Seoul, South Korea created nationwide hysteria by announcing the Rapture would take place on October 28, 1992. 20,000 Koreans in South Korea, Los Angeles and New York quit jobs and left families to prepare for their trip to heaven. There was no rapture. Believers took Rim's failed prediction calmly but law enforcement did not. Rim was arrested and sentenced to two years in prison for the \$4.4 million he bilked from believers. The kicker? He had invited it in bonds that didn't mature until the next year.

These excursions distract us from the weightier matters of loving God and neighbor now, while we are still here. At the least we could get the bumper sticker that says "Jesus is coming: look busy!" Better, we

could learn from our history as Methodists and remember that our founder John Wesley's warm-hearted experience with God's grace set him on fire with passion for the Gospel. Best, we could remember Jesus says in today's reading from Acts "*It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*" (Acts 1:7-8) When Jesus ascended and the disciples watched slack-jawed, the angels said "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" In effect the angel says, "Get on with it."

One of the things that means is to cherish the moments you've got. Not to be a "downer" but I imagine I've been to more funerals than anyone in this sanctuary. I've presided at 376 as of Dot Law's service on Friday, which doesn't count the ones I've attended as a guest. No, I don't get used to it. What's my point? I never hear families say "I wished I'd paid more attention to the Rapture, or the prophecies in Revelation, or read more *Left Behind* books. If people have regrets it's for missed opportunities to love and laugh and live with their dear ones.

This passion for living can be a reflection of the love of God. Confirmants: that is where you come in. A part of why you are here today is because, in addition to investing in yourself, parents and grandparents and godparents and extended family and church family invested love in you. They invested themselves in you. They hope that you know, or will come to know, the love they have for Christ and the world; and loving you is a way to show that.

So for God's sake—literally, for God's sake as well as your own—when you go out of here today, come back here next week. And the next. And the next. Take seriously this reading from Revelation, as earnestly and heart-felt as you can muster. Love the people closest to you. Let them know it every day. And love the people you are NOT close to, because otherwise we are no different from anyone else. And come to Jesus not only by saying, "Lord, Lord" and confessing Jesus as personal Savior and Lord, but by feeding the hungry and clothing the

naked and visiting the sick and the imprisoned and speaking out against evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. Because this Jesus, who is the Alpha and Omega, who is the beginning and the end, who says that he—as today’s reading says—“comes to repay according to everyone’s work” is also the Jesus who said, “Not everyone who says ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the Kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

When we begin to do that we won’t worry about when Jesus is coming or where he’s coming and we won’t be anxious about who’s in and who’s out and we won’t be afraid about whether we left something undone or unsaid because we will know we did everything we could in our heart and in our relationships and in our world to love, to show mercy, to serve. We will hear him say “*Surely I am coming soon*” and we will say “*Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*” and the benediction of John of Patmos will echo through the caverns of our soul: “*The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints*” and all the saints will answer:

**Amen! Amen! Amen!**