

WHO GOES TO HEAVEN?

First in the series "Questions from the Floor"

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John 14:1-7

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Many of you are aware that during the spring, I announced that for the summer I would be departing from the lectionary readings that usually guide our preaching here at Idlewild, and would be focusing instead on questions that you might have for me to address. I have been grateful for the response (and am especially grateful that no one asked me to preach on any of those hot topics that might force me to circulate my resume after preaching on them!) So we'll consider questions of, yes, predestination (hey, you asked for it!); evil and why bad things happen. You have asked how we can be kind to each other within the doors of the church and not just to people "out there"; Some of you wondered how we can move beyond fundamentalism and liberalism, and finally, a child wanted to know what a child could do to be faithful.

I hope that this series will be an explicit expression of what is true all the time: that preaching is a partnership between pastor and people, an on-going conversation shaped by Scripture, tradition, experience, and that mysterious movement of the living Spirit of God illumining our hearts and minds. So whereas I could not deal with all of the questions proposed, I will certainly let them guide me in my preaching when this series is over and we resume the liturgical calendar in the fall.

Let us pray: Holy God, in this precious hour we pause and gather to hear your word. Free us in these moments from every distraction, that we may focus to listen; that we may hear; that we may be more loving. Amen.

The question asked for today was submitted by several people in several different ways. Who will be saved? Do non-Christians go to heaven as we know it? Who's in and who's out? It is, of course, a little difficult to gather empirical evidence on this matter—whom are we going to interview? Do we take a poll? That's the American way! (I remember reading recently that 70% of Americans believe in angels. I guess that means angels must exist!) But Presbyterians are split on the question of who can be saved. 46% of members and 45 % of Presbyterian clergy "strongly agree" with the statement that "only followers of Jesus Christ can be saved."¹

Naturally, as Christians we must approach the question in a different way, starting, of course, with scripture. The word "to save" in the Greek language of the New Testament is the same word as the word for "to heal." To save is to heal. Marcus Borg therefore defined salvation as "the healing of the wounds of existence"² — the wounds we inflict upon ourselves and others; the wounds others inflict upon us; the wounds which come simply as a result of being a part of the natural world.

When most of us think of salvation, however, we think of something that happens to us when we die, but the greatest emphasis of the Bible is on salvation in and for this life on

earth. The Old Testament focuses almost entirely on salvation in and for this life on earth.³ God has saved us, God has acted in history, *our* history. God has *delivered* us from the house of bondage into freedom. And God will continue to save us! That's salvation in the Old Testament, and for the most part, though the New Testament does address the life to come, the greatest proportion of the teaching in the New Testament continues that tradition, focusing on what we are saved *from* and what we are saved *for* in the life we are living here and now.

Wherever there is estrangement, wherever there is suffering, we are able to experience salvation that comes only from God, by God's grace.

- If, for example, we are weighed down by *guilt*, salvation comes in the form of forgiveness. Several of you have told me that the high point of the worship service, the message that gets you ready for the next week, is when, after the prayer of confession, the liturgist says "In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven."
- If, on the other hand, we are *estranged* from God, or from others, or from our self (which is a bitter estrangement), then salvation comes in the form of reconciliation.
- If we are in *bondage*, which can be physical, emotional, chemical (think of the power of chemical addictions-alcohol, drugs, and nicotine), or even financial bondage, salvation comes in the form of liberation from that bondage.
- If we are victims of *injustice*, salvation is experienced by being made whole, being restored to the new creation that God desires for us.

All of these point to a life that can become new through God's grace; a life which is healthy, whole. A life which can then bless others. That is what God intends for all creation.

Christians, of course, believe that salvation comes through a particular act of God in history-- the birth, life, death, and resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. The fact that God would overcome the historic estrangement between God and humankind by entering fully the human condition would bring God and human together. But it was only a few decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus that salvation came to be so closely associated with dying and getting to heaven.

Why? A large part of it was the influence of the Greek philosophers upon the early church, which led to a Gnostic dualism. Everything on earth, all matter, was evil, impure. Everything "spiritual," or "other-worldly" was divine, good. It was anti-thetical to the Hebraic understanding of the world and the self, but it became the goal of the Christian life to simply endure this life of suffering and wait forsalvation!

You can use a little imagination to see how this shift was made. Imagine you were born in the late first century or early in the second century....about the time the Gospel of John was written. You are very poor, perhaps even a slave. Your life expectancy might be

30 or 40 years, and it is a hard life. If you have children, there's a good chance they'll die in infancy. You work from sunup to sundown and pray you don't get sick. There are no safety nets. Your expectations of life, then, are mainly negative ones: that you can get through it without too much pain. So what is salvation to mean for them? Heaven.

Heaven as consolation for the sorrows and deprivations of earth. Heaven as a good destiny that can offset the bad destiny, the fate, that seems one's unavoidable lot here and now.⁴ And so through the ages, wherever there has been a life dominated by poverty and misery, the theological focus was always "pie in the sky, in the sweet by and by." And it was often those in power, such as slave owners, who emphasized this other worldly salvation so that those under them would be satisfied with their lot..

And so the question has been: How do you get to heaven? Who will be saved? Once again, throughout scriptures it becomes clear that it is God's intention that all of creation be saved, but if there is one verse that has been used to whack those not of the faith it is the one that I read earlier. "No one comes to the Father except through me.

The irony about this text is that it is set in the midst of some of the most comforting words in all of scriptures—words that are read at funerals. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." Jesus was saying good-bye to his disciples. He knew they were troubled, were wondering how they could get along without him. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places....if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going."

And then Thomas, bless him, said "No Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

To simplify things, Jesus just said "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

It's an incredible source of comfort, as much for us as it was for them. But there are times when this text is used as a club with which we beat others over the head, or as a knife with which we can surgically sever the saved from the damned. And not just when we go after Muslims or Jews or other religions that may seem strange to us, not just outside the camp of Christianity. Sometimes we use it inside the faith as well.

Think of how much harm has been done by this text. How many times do you suppose people have taken that ugly strain of exclusivism in the gospel of John and just gone wild with it? A lot of evil has been done because some Christians have used it to bully and browbeat and force submission from everyone else in the world who thinks differently. The Crusades, the persecution of the Jews, the worst of some Victorian mission efforts which were often really cultural expeditions—taking woolen underwear to the Hawaiian islanders, for instance. How often have we taken those words, "the way" and interpreted them to mean "our" way, "my" way, until that way has been so narrowly and carefully staked out that you can't walk on it unless you walk sideways and single-file?

But when Presbyterians interpret scripture, we look at the text in the greater context of all of scripture, especially the greater context of the life and teachings of Jesus. And if you look at the grander context of Jesus' life, you'll find a much wider "way", a broader "way" than many of us have tended to imagine. What is "the way" he spoke of was more of an invitation than a highly-secured piece of territory? After all, Jesus did not say "This little collection of creeds about me is the way." "This little handful of propositions is the way." Not even "This religion about me is the way." He said "I am the way." I...in my complexity, I in my mystery...I in my sometimes confusing choices and priorities, I...the One forever moving toward the edges and beyond boundaries and over the top—I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by this wide, broad, subversively unpredictable way. A way that is impossible to nail down and grasp a hold of, but that is forever moving like a holy wind through the lives of people and nations and races. A way that will not fit into your back pocket, (nor into a single belief system) but, if you let it, will move through you and in you until it has turned you upside down.⁵

The Jesus that I see in the grand picture painted by the gospels is much, much bigger than the tidiest, most deliberate little interpretations of this one verse from John: "I am the way...no one comes to the Father except through me."

For I see the way of a sower who went out to sow, only he didn't place the seeds along a tidy row. He threw them every which way into the wind. Everywhere! Nothing narrow about that way.

I see the way of a man who brought children forward. There were time schedules and handlers, but he took the children onto his lap and said (more or less) "This is what my way looks like."

I see the way of a man who cavorted with all sorts of people who were on the "outs," deemed "impure" by religion, thereby broadening the way.

In short, I see Jesus, there all but on his death bed, wanting to convey that this Way is not a Way of excluding or drawing lines; it's a Way of living. And of dying.

It's funny how we have latched onto this one verse and made it the Gospel about who's in and who's out. Because there are other texts that are exclusionary, but not always to our advantage. Near the beginning of Matthew Jesus says "Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven.'" (Mt. 7:21) And then toward the end, his parable of the final judgment informs us that those who feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, and clothe the naked are the ones who will sit at the throne of God's glory. (Mt. 25:31-46) It's no wonder we don't hear those made into a kind of "litmus test" for entrance into heaven. We might not fare so well!

So, where does this leave us in our initial, rather complex question of who is saved and who isn't? Let me offer just a few suggestions:

First, as we move beyond the scope of one tiny verse and see the grander scope of holy scripture, we see a God who is clearly *for* the world. Who created the world in love and saw that it was good; whose heart breaks when there is estrangement from God. We see a God whose intention is that all of creation be healed, be made whole, be saved.

Second, it is important to remember that in this text Jesus was not addressing other world religions as we know them. Oh, he would have been exposed to some Persian religions such as Zoroastrianism and Roman mythology, and some pagan religions. So to place the burden of rejection of all other faiths for all time on one saying, appearing only in John's gospel, is to place too much emphasis on one single saying.

Rather, he was addressing his followers. He was not making a general metaphysical statement about "God." He didn't say "No one comes to God except through me." He says "No one comes to the *Father* except through me. God here is the One whom the disciples had come to recognize in the life and death of Jesus. One scholar suggests that when Jesus says "No one..." he means "none of you." This is addressed to a particular community, not an exclusionary community.⁶ And the claim of exclusion becomes problematic when it is used to speak to questions that were never in the Gospel of John's purview.

Third, when we think of other religions, we ought to think of them with respect and take them seriously. There are sparks of the divine in many ways of knowing on earth. And who is to say that God, in God's infinite wisdom, does not work through the cultures and beliefs of other people whose view of life is very different from ours. Are all the same? Of course not. "By your fruits you shall know them," Jesus said on another occasion in Matthew. (Mt. 7:20) The truth of any religion is in the quality of life that religion brings forth from its believers and whether, from a Christian point of view, that belief bears the marks and signs of the Kingdom of God, where the whole creation exists in praise of its creator, and the people of every nation and culture do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Fourth, we believe in a God of grace and a God of justice, and we hold those in creative tension. I have a friend who would say "Because we believe in a God of grace, we are always on the edge of universalism (that is, the belief that all are saved, no matter what). But because we believe in a God of justice, we don't quite step over that threshold."

That takes us to our final conclusion, and that is that any discussion about who is saved and who isn't, who goes to heaven and who doesn't ought to be conducted with a deep, deep humility before a God who eternally exceeds our human capacity to fully grasp. There is a mystery which cannot be explained or understood and we are better off honoring that rather than trying to fix doctrines and dogmas that wrap difficult issues like this into a neat, exclusionary package.

Some of you might remember Father Theodore Hesburgh, who was the president of Notre Dame for years. In his autobiography, he reflected on his call to the priesthood and where it had led him:

“I have traveled far and wide, far beyond the simple parish I envisioned as a young man. My obligation of service has led me into diverse yet interrelated roles: college teacher, theologian, president of a great university, counselor to four popes and six presidents of the United States... I have held fourteen presidential appointments over the years, dealing with the social issues of our times, including civil rights, peaceful uses of atomic energy, campus unrest, amnesty for Vietnam offenders, Third world developments, and immigration reform.

But beneath it all, wherever I have been... I have always and everywhere considered myself essentially a priest. [Since I was first ordained in 1943] I have offered Mass every day, save one, and I have prayed the breviary each day, too. Even so, as I get older, it is increasingly clear to me that I know God all too little. I believe in God profoundly, I pray to God often, and I am grateful that God revealed God’s self to us as Jesus Christ...”⁷

“As I get older, it is increasingly clear to me that I know God all too little.” Is that because he is falling away from the faith? Hardly. It is because as he grows in faith, he becomes more and more aware of the immensity of God eternally exceeding our human capacity to grasp it.

We follow Jesus because for us, He is the Way. We say that without fully understanding all that that means. It is not up to us to decide who is following the way correctly and who isn’t... who will make it and who won’t. We leave the faith and questions of those outside the faith to a loving, gracious God who is equal to the task.

And we dedicate our lives to following the One who comes and dwells among us, full of grace and truth, putting our energies into following the Way, sharing with others what that means to us, and working for the healing of the wounds of the world, the salvation that God so desperately desires, and that only God can ultimately provide.

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¹ “Presbyterian Panel Survey,” “Is Jesus the Only Way?” *Presbyterians Today*, May, 2002. p. 5.

² Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*. Harper, 1997, p. 158.

³ Alan Richardson, “Salvation,” *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4, pages 169-181. The authors notes only two exceptions: Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2.

⁴ Douglas John Hall, *Why Christianity?: For Those on the Edge of Faith*. Fortress, 1998, p. 43.

⁵ Theodore J. Wardlaw, “The Works Themselves,” Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta. April 28, 2002.

⁶ Gail O’Day, *New Interpreters’ Bible: John*, Abingdon Press, Vol. 9, p. 744.

⁷ Theodore Hesburgh, *God, Country, and Notre Dame*. Ballantine Books, 1990), p. ix-x.