

What Happens When We Die?
#2 in a sermon series on Life's Unanswered Questions
Sunday, February 12, 2012
Rev. Susan Cartmell

This month our sermon theme is "Life's Unanswered Questions". The topics for these sermons are generated by you and by the deacons. Several of you mentioned that you would like to hear a sermon addressed at the question - "What about heaven and hell?" What do we believe? One father of a teenage boy told me his son asked one day recently, "Dad, what really does happen when you die?" So that seemed like a great topic for this series. For this sermon I will be leaning heavily on a new book by Rob Bell - LOVE WINS. You can find it in our church bookstore. I am using Bell's book not because it is all that original, but because he finally said what needed to be said about heaven and hell.

I want to address this question because I think many children and youth ask about this. But I am also eager to address it because so many people think that the church has a very strict view on heaven and hell. Most people think that the church provides salvation. But for the the faith we would be doomed to spend eternity in a fiery hell. instead, the faithful who follow Jesus, do God's will, and believe in the resurrection will go to heaven when they die.

I want to stop here and let you know that I don't believe there is any evidence whatsoever for this interpretation of heaven and hell in the Bible. No where in holy scripture does it say you will go to hell if you disagree with the church.

What does the Bible say?

In the first place there is no mention of hell - as a place where people go to endure a long torturous after-life.

This idea about the possible destinations for your soul in the afterlife gained momentum in the Middle Ages. If you read Dante's Inferno you find a description of the torturous existence that awaits the sinful in hell. Indeed, Dante depicts the torture of the unrighteous with a zeal that is frightening.

One of the most famous depictions of the difference between heaven and hell is the one done by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Like much of the art of the era, it shows a stark contrast between the destiny of the righteous who join a heavenly choir and the torture of the damned. These images and notions have planted such a firm foothold in the human psyche that all these years later, people fear hell, and strive for heaven when they die.

Throughout the Middle Ages, sadly the Church stoked the fear of hell, and manipulated it to control people, to raise money through the sale of indulges, to build a powerful dominions, be pretending to control the place where people would spend eternity - like any institution, even the Church, can really control such a thing- as what you fate will be when you die.

In our time, many churches have continued to tell people that they hold some key to the door of salvation, and can explain what God is seeking on your application for admission to heaven. Many churches tell you that they know how to achieve or ensure salvation.

Some emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus.

Others tell you to follow the Ten Commandments, and love your neighbor as yourself.

You must accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior

You must be baptized.

You must follow the straight and narrow.

If these churches are right they set up restrictions on heaven that patronize other religions, and anyone outside their own flock, assuming that unless they subscribe to their strict interpretation of salvation, surely they will be doomed to spend eternity in hell.

Most of these churches preach that they know who will be going to hell - The list includes - Muslims, Hindus, all gay people, anyone who happened to grow up in a family where they did not attend church, and many of us who don't agree with these more rigidly religious people. If you are like me, you have relatives who are praying for your soul, because they have grown convinced that you won't be accompanying them to the heavenly rest that they anticipate.

At some level, it is pretty silly.

On many levels it is an abuse of the church's power.

The spiritual abuse in this theory has contributed to the worst aspects of the missionary movement, and it has brought untold pain to the gay community, and to anyone who felt themselves condemned by it.

In the second place, what about heaven? When Jesus uses the word heaven he there were 3 things he might mean.

1. The word heaven was a substitute for God. People in Jesus' time tried to avoid saying God. It showed respect to use other words for God, and heaven one of those substitutes.

The kingdom of heaven really meant the kingdom of God.

2. Sometimes when Jesus uses the word heaven, he is referring to the future that he sees. Jesus often talked poetically about a time he envisioned when heaven and earth would come together. The disciples called it life in the age to come. When we pray the Lord's prayer we were hoping for a time when goodness and mercy would be here on earth - our values would be transformed. The line that sets up that image best is "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."

3. Heaven referred to our experience of joy and peace and love in this life. "Heaven for Jesus was not 'someday'; it was a present reality. When the rich man comes to Jesus to ask how he might inherit eternal life, they are not talking about saving the rich man from the fires of eternal damnation, the rich man is seeking meaning, not salvation in the hereafter. Jesus sees that the man is sincere, and they he asks him what he has done. The man has really tried to be good - living by the Ten Commandments he puts his faith into action. He treats his neighbor as he would himself. Jesus tells him to give away his riches, because his overabundance is getting in the way of his supreme happiness. The man goes away perplexed. That is asking a lot.

When Jesus sees a tax collector up in a tree, he asks him to come down, and invites himself to the man's house for dinner. Now the tax collector is rich, but he is so moved by Christ Jesus that he decided to give away half his possessions to the poor. Then Zacchaeus declares, "If I have defrauded anyone, I will restore it to them 4 fold. It is this tax collector's way of making good on his intention to stop taking from the poor to line his own pockets. Jesus says - Truly salvation has come to this house. He does not mean- you have finally avoided hell, and earned your wings. But he says - Zacchaeus - you have turned your life around and in this moment, supreme happiness is yours. Here and now - the kingdom of God is real. Here -justice is made known.

When Mormons go to the Temple, they go first to a locker room where they exchange their street clothes for white robes. It is meant to be an equalizer, but it also reminds people that if they want to be putting on white robes in eternity, they should follow the dictates of the Mormon Church. The Mormons promise believers who follow their faith eternal life in heaven. But they also tell people that you cannot be sure about your relatives going to heaven unless they get baptized the Mormon way. This theory of heaven and hell appeals to religious institutions that seek to control every aspect of people's lives.

Jesus' mission was never that controlling. He had a freedom about him. Jesus never came to save our souls from hell when we die. He came to show us how to live, so that we would find joy on earth- the kind that makes us feel like God's kingdom is all around us.

What kind of God sends his son to live and die a terrible death just to test us? What kind of God would sentence people from other faiths to hell?

What kind of God would send children who died young to hell because their parents never got around to baptizing them?

What kind of God would create people who were not supposed to be themselves- for fear that if they lived wholly into their identity it was a set-up and they would be doomed to hell?

When I was at the Boston Pride Parade several years ago a young man approached me. I had my collar on and he came to ask me a question. It was a burning question for him, and he had tears in his eyes. He said, "My priest told me that I was going to hell. Is that true?" I looked him square in the eye and told him "No, God is not like that." The sermon started with the question. What happens when you die? I don't know. I like the image in a movie I saw at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Many people died, and

there were some bitter words in those days as people endured both illness and rejection. But in the last scene of the movie everyone walks along a beach together. Everyone is there. That is a vision of heaven I can endorse.

I don't know what happens when we die any more than an infant in the womb knows what the earth will be like before it is born. But I do trust that the same hands that shaped and molded us, formed us for life, will also receive us in the end. So we have nothing - nothing! - to fear. Who thinks like this? No loving God I would want to worship.

God loved us enough to send Jesus and he came not to condemn the world to a tricky set of conditions that would establish some state in the after-life. No Jesus came to show us how to live.