

June 26, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Who Gets to Heaven?

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Romans 11:34-36

The question of heaven and hell and who's going where confounds many of us. After I die, will I see my best friend again? He refuses to believe in God and has never even stepped inside a church. What about Muslims and Hindus, will any of them get to heaven? Or, how about isolated African tribes that have never heard the gospel?

Will all human beings be saved? Just who gets to heaven, anyway?

To attempt to answer these tough questions I am going to lean heavily on a section of our denomination's Study Catechism, which you will have an opportunity to confirm later in the service. (See end of sermon.) Will all human beings be saved? The catechism answers, "**No one will be lost who can be saved.**" God alone is in the salvation business. None of us are saved except by grace.

Who wants to put a limit on God's grace? Well, Christians do; or at least *some* Christians do. Even a cursory look at history will show you a sordid record of Christians torturing nonbelievers, executing infidels, burning heretics at the stake, and don't forget the Holocaust. When you hear your fundamentalist Aunt Tilly going on about there being no way to salvation, no knowledge of God even, except through Jesus Christ, you can hear behind that claim centuries of Christendom's

service to imperial Western peoples. Such Christians will of course find all kinds of scriptural justification for this position. (What can't you find in the Bible if you are really looking for it and are willing to take phrases out of context?) However, the real impetus behind this exclusivist rhetoric is the long-standing association of Christianity with powerful nations, dominant governments, and imperialistic colonization.

Lately, there has been a mini-movement in some of the most conservative Presbyterian Churches, which has been prompted by the homosexuality debate. These conservative Presbyterians want to require officers of *all* Presbyterian churches, as well as all denominational employees, to assent to four doctrinal beliefs. Among the proposed required doctrine is this line: "That Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation."

A favorite biblical quote for these folks comes from the Gospel according to John, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6). Let's take that sentence at face value. Let's even become more "literal" than the literalists and listen to what John's Jesus actually says: "**I** am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." He doesn't say this or that *doctrine* about him, or *image* of him, or *creed* concerning him is "the Way." He says that he, *himself*, is the way. Nor does he say that only those who *acknowledge* that he is, indeed, "the Way" are going to be "saved."

If we look at the gospels in their entirety, it is obvious that Jesus is constantly shocking his disciples by associating with people whom they considered below them. Is it not likely that Jesus' modern-day disciples are just as prone to restrict his associations in this world and the next to their own inner circle?

In his book *Why Christian?* Douglas John Hall urges us to look at this another way. If I ask myself, "How has my Christian faith affected my attitude towards others—other religions, other races, people of other sexual identity and so forth?" I might answer this way: I know that my own "natural" tendency, which has been reinforced by my background - my family, my country, my privileged economic class - is to look upon nearly all of these "others" with a kind of a half-conscious suspicion, or at the very least a certain caution. I may have learned to soften or hide or sublimate that gut reaction, but it is still a part of me. The fact that I, by accident of birth, belong to a very "successful" race and a very powerful nation only accentuates my tendency to exclude others.

Now – here's the point – what continues to counteract and transform this aboriginal exclusivity in me is *chiefly*... Jesus Christ! Far from sanctioning or encouraging that "natural" habit of exclusion, the grace that comes from him constantly judges that habit and strives to replace it with at least the beginnings of a far greater openness to others. If I am not the chauvinist, the bigot, the racist, the sexist that I might otherwise have been, it is chiefly because of Jesus. After all he was astonishingly open to all sorts and conditions of human beings, mingling with the most despised people of his day, forgiving and even blessing his enemies, and finally laying down his life for people whom he could have justifiably ignored and written off. I cannot think of him and condone my feelings of suspicion or hesitancy or polite unconcern when I interact with those different from me.

What I am trying to say is that the gift – the grace – that makes faith possible is a grace that struggles against our *self*-absorbed, *self*-preserving human nature. I am saying that faith in Jesus as the one who makes God real and present to Christians, far from reinforcing and stimulating our sinful tendency to exclude others, positively drives us toward a greater inclusivity. The catechism puts it this way, "**No judge could possibly be more gracious than Jesus.**"

To return now to the original question of heaven and hell and who is going where, I suspect that when we get to heaven we will be surprised at the company we keep. I do believe that hell is a reality, but that it doesn't have to be permanent. In fact, I believe that God will never be content for one of his creatures to remain unredeemed; that he didn't create anyone to banish or punish them forever. Logically it seems possible that some could continue to reject God beyond the grave. But, practically, from what we know of God in Jesus Christ, it is probable that God will continue to try to bring good out of evil; that God will try to seek a relationship with us beyond the grave. And, if God keeps trying, God will probably succeed. But, God will have to succeed without compelling us to love her. The choice will always be ours.

William James in *The Will to Believe*, used the illustration of a chess match to explain my point here. The game is between a master and a novice. The novice is free to make whatever move he wishes and delay the outcome. But, the outcome is certain. Eventually the master will win.

Let me take this a step further. (This may seem radical, because it is.) I believe the primary purpose of Christian conversion is not to escape punishment, but to receive the power to love in a way, which is otherwise impossible. In other words, primarily we don't need to be converted to gain heaven; we need to be converted in order to love the way God loves. This is the point of The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). In essence Jesus says to his disciples, "If you love only friends, family, and cohorts, you're not doing anything special. That's natural. Even criminals and pagans do that. But, I tell you, love strangers, enemies, and even persecutors. Why? So that you will be loving the way God loves!" (Mt. 5:43-48).

In the end, the *Catechism* is right, "**How God will deal with those who do not know or follow Christ but follow another tradition, we cannot finally say.**" We can say, however, that you and I are not the only ones God loves or intends to redeem. I have met too many saintly people from other religions to believe that God can be contained by one culture or one religious bias.

I recall and like to remember that years ago the great poet and author, Carl Sandberg, was asked by a reporter what the ugliest word in the English language is. In his distinctive draw he responded, "The ugliest word...the ugliest word...the ugliest word...the ugliest word is *exclusive*."

Three Questions and Answers of the *Study Catechism*:

Q. Will all human beings be saved?

A. No one will be lost who can be saved. The limits to salvation, whatever they may be, are known only to God. Three truths above all are certain. God is a holy God who is not to be trifled with. No one will be saved except by grace alone. And no judge could possibly be more gracious than our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Q. How will God deal with the followers of other religions?

A. God has made salvation available to all human beings through Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. How God will deal with those who do not know or follow Christ, but who follow another tradition, we cannot finally say. We can say, however, that God is gracious and merciful, and that God will not deal with people in any other way than we see in Jesus Christ, who came as the Savior of the world.

Q. How should I treat non-Christians and people of other religions?

A. As much as I can, I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith with humility and devotion as the occasion requires, whether silently or openly, boldly or meekly, by word or by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should always welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of me.