

Fourth Sunday in Lent: Series the BIG Questions:

“Why do *(some)* Christians think they are the only ones who go to heaven?”

March 11, 2018

"Some day you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. I shall be more alive than I am now. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God." Well we did hear that rumour that Billy Graham died earlier this year. If only he could talk to us now! I would love to know in whose company he is finding himself!

“Why do Christians think they are the only ones who go to heaven?” you asked.

At first glance, this is a really easy question to answer:

So why do they think that?

Some Christians, - especially Christians who take the Bible as the literally inspired Word of God for all times- believe this because there are a number of verses and statements in the Bible that sound like that.

Christians who are concerned about what might be happening to them in the afterlife see statements like the following:

“ I am the way, the truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6)

In Acts 4.12 Peter proclaims, "Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved”.

Christians who are sure that they profess Jesus as Lord and Saviour and do their best to follow his teaching and commandments gain two attitudes from the belief that only Christians will enjoy an afterlife “in heaven” with God: First, comfort and joy for themselves – their future and life beyond the grave is assured; and

Second: a great missionary zeal to convert others to the Christian faith, beginning usually with their family and friends and extending to wider and wider circles.

This belief, we must not underestimate this, has led and still leads to a great zeal to spread the gospel.

If it were not for forbearers who had this belief, would there even be a church in North America?

But here the easy part ends:

This belief, that only Christians go to “heaven” has also caused enormous amounts of pain. Misguided missionary efforts, judgementalism and smug “I am better than you” attitudes.

Worse than that, this belief has caused serious psychological harm when combined with the flip side of the belief that only Christians go to heaven: Non believers, and “Bad people” will go to eternal punishment, or hell.

Again, why Christians can think that way has to do with a few verses which (especially when taken out of context!) do sound like this teaching:

“And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Mt 25:46)

Violent imagery from the book of Revelation:

“If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night (Rev. 14:9-11)

and then there is the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.(Luke 16:19-31)

Many of you may have childhood trauma from being indoctrinated with verses like this. Passages like that, read to you when you were way too young. Passages like these, used by religion teachers, parents or grandparents, or clergy to frighten you into obedience, to keep you on the “narrow path” however adults defined that for you.

I wish to believe that most of the people who taught you this did it out of sincere concern for your soul, and not because they wished to manipulate you into “being good”.

But, whatever their motivation was, the harm was done.

And, it gets more complicated:

The belief in an afterlife of heaven for certain committed Christians and hell for anyone else causes not only untold harm, it can also become absurd.

Let me tell you a true story:

I had a close high school friend who was a few years older and introduced me to evangelical Christianity. In high school, I knew he was a “believer” and that his sister and him attended bible studies and youth gatherings at their church. This sounded way more interesting than what the catholic church had to offer to me, which was morning mass before school. We stayed friends through my first year at university and had a lot of

conversations about the faith. Much to Uki's delight I began to attend some of the events the evangelical campus ministry offered. I also began university courses in protestant theology. This is when Uki became nervous. "Are you sure the Lord wants you to study theology?" He enquired. "You could loose your faith. It could be Satan who tells you to study, so that you come off the path of faith and become a sceptic."

After a few months I was pretty sure it was not Satan, because I found joy in the studies, feeling closer to God than I had in a long time, and I seriously began to consider studying for the ministry.

Now Uki was upset and angry. He sat me down and gave me a stern talking: "Don't you know what Paul says about women teaching in church?! Women have a role that is supportive of the male in church. You training to become a minister – that would be leaving the narrow path and going on the wide path of the world, the path to destruction, I am telling you!"

I was baffled and upset- here was someone who I had considered a close friend now opening a deep divide between us. I told him that I had no reason to believe that there was any harm in me pursuing my path to ordination, and that the wider church would discern whether I was suited, not he. The final straw came when, after another particularly heated discussion, I asked him point blank: "so tell me, Uki, this path of destruction I am on, where do you think its gonna lead me?" And he said "To hell". And I said " so, you are ok with a faith that says that a good person like myself, someone you've seen worthy to be your friend for years, that this person is going to hell because she wants to serve God as a Christian minister?!" His answer was something like: I am not enjoying this, but I have to tell you what the Bible says, its Gods word, not mine.

Well that was it for me. Not even my aged catholic priest was quite as blunt, when I told him I was becoming protestant. His answer was..."It is my duty to tell you, child, that the Catholic church teaches that whoever separates from her separates from salvation." And when I asked if he felt like a failure because he had given me my early religious education, he said he was sad, but he also thought that God's ways were bigger than his own limited understanding.

Some evangelical Christians like Uki, believe that only evangelicals go to heaven.

Some strict Catholic Christians believe that only catholics go to heaven.

Some Baptists believe that unless you had a conversion as an adult and were baptized as adult, you won't go to heaven.

Based on their reading of Revelations, the Jehovah's Witnesses believe that

exactly 144,000 faithful Christians go to heaven to rule with Christ in the new kingdom of God.

We are United Church of Canada – if heaven is such a small place – perhaps we should believe that only Canadians go to heaven?

It should be obvious that this talk is absurd.

So, we need to ask the more complicated question: “Is it true that Christians are the only ones who go to heaven?”

It is not true for many reasons, but here I will tackle two areas:

First: Its not true because the picture of God that such a belief paints is a false picture, not even in tune with the God of the prophets of the Old Testament, and certainly not with the God whom Jesus embodies.

This false picture looks like this: A remote deity is distant but concerned for us. This deity makes laws which he expects humans to “obey” or they will get punished. We humans pass through the earth for only a short time and what matters most is what happens to our soul when we die. We must obey God's laws so our souls get saved from eternal damnation.

I could expand on just how wrong this image of God is, but that would be too much for this sermon.

The truthful images of God (note the plural!) that emerge the strongest from Old and NT witnesses are images of a God who is not remote but passionately involved in life on earth. Humans are made in God's image and they are earth creatures. God is always creating, guiding, liberating, educating these miserable and beautiful creatures, challenging, yes, warning people of the dire consequences of their actions, (especially of actions of indifference towards the poor and the weakest members of society) consequences that are to be suffered in this life and beyond. We meet a God who is not distant but radically different. God who seeks relationship all the time, a God who extends his love and mercy beyond assumed boundaries, a God who surprises us with forgiveness and new beginnings, a God whose most important command is “Love me with your body and your soul and your mind' and “Love your neighbour as you love yourself” (Mt 22:36-40)

Now, just out of interest (Not that this is an important theme for him)

lets look at who gets into hell In Jesus preaching:

- the rich guy -who even in hell still thinks that poor Lazarus only exists to make his own life more comfortable (!)

- The people who said “Lord Lord” but never helped anyone in need because they assumed that their love for Jesus had nothing to do with their love for the poor (Mt. 7 and Mt 25)

Lets look at who gets into “heaven” (Not that this is important for Jesus either!)

- the thief crucified with Jesus who, in the last minute, gives an honest insight into his life, and expression of kindness to Jesus (Luke 23:35-43)
- All the children, and those adults who are like them (Mark 10:13-16 and parallels)

Nowhere does it imply that these children were baptized, or even children of Christian parents. In fact, they were most certainly not. They were Jewish children he blessed, of Jewish parents.

As for the passages written by the apostles in response to what happened at Golgotha and on Easter, certainly they preach with urgency that this is a time for the world for decision making. To follow in the path of Love which Jesus showed is difficult; that's why it's a narrow path. But without the choice of the narrow path of love, our world goes to hell in a hand basket, as most people follow the wide paths of comfort and materialism. The narrow path is the path of Christ-like living, not a path of a certain religion.

Second: Its not true that Christians are the only ones who “go to heaven” because what matters in the New Testament is Christ- Like- Living, not what you confess with words.

Many non Christians have imitated and still do imitate Christ's life.

Mahatma Ghandi was one of them. To a missionary he famously said: “I like your Christ, but not your Christians”

Look at how many in “Doctors without borders” or emergency personnel risk their lives just to help the most traumatized people into healing.

And surely you all know a person who is not Christian, but perhaps a Muslim or Buddhist whose life is inspiring and reminds you, the Christian, of what Jesus would have done.

The Catholic Church acknowledges now that people can lead Christ like lives without being Christian.

The United Church is very quiet on these things these days...

But, I can safely say, - Mainline Christians do generally not think Christians are the only ones who go to heaven.

Jesus lived, died and was raised for everyone. His redemptive embrace was for the WORLD, not just a chosen few. The Good News is Good News even for atheists. Yes, the choice to accept its reach is everyone's own. This is

assuming they have truly received good news, not some bullying into Christianity by fear-mongering or an extra stupid version of Christianity.. But- as it was wisely said by a participant in our ecumenical study- "Even if you don't love Jesus, Jesus still loves you."

If you are concerned about a non-Christian family member or friend, and what will happen to them, perhaps you may want to re-read today's Gospel. The story of the two thieves on the cross shows that life decisions are not over until life is over.

And finally, even among the real evangelicals one can see some softening, as a quote from an exchange between Robert Schuller, TV Pastor of the Crystal Cathedral, and Billy Graham (in 1997) shows.

Dr. Schuller: *"What I hear you saying is that it's possible for Jesus Christ to come into a human heart and soul and life even if they've been born in darkness and have never had exposure to the Bible. Is that a correct interpretation of what you're saying?"* Dr. Graham: *"Yes it is because I believe that. I've met people in various parts of the world in tribal situations that they have never seen a Bible or heard about a Bible, have never heard of Jesus but they've believed in their hearts that there is a God and they tried to live a life that was quite apart from the surrounding community in which they lived."* Dr. Schuller: *"This is fantastic. I'm so thrilled to hear you say that. There's a wideness in God's mercy."* Dr. Graham: *"There is. There definitely is."*

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