

WHO ENTERS HEAVEN?

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, August 13, 2017
based on Acts 17:22-31; John 1:1-5,14; 10:11-16***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a summer sermon series entitled, "The Hope of Heaven." Last week we considered a parable of Jesus which pictured heaven as a wedding feast; and in the parable invitations go out to all. But not all answer the invitation, and not all are finally worthy to stand at the feast in the presence of the king. We noted how we are all invited to come to God's grace, and how it is Christ who finally makes us worthy to stand in the presence of God by cleansing us of our sin and clothing us with his righteousness. But then near the end of the sermon we raised the question: What about people who never quite get the invitation? What about people who grow up in a non-Christian environment where they never really hear the gospel in a way that they can receive it? Can non-Christians, who remain non-Christians, be saved? This is a question that we will pursue this morning, along with the broader question of who can enter heaven. Let us begin with a moment of prayer. . . .

There's a story about a little girl who told her teacher that she was looking forward to seeing John Wayne in heaven. Her teacher said, "How do you know that John Wayne will be in heaven? The little girl replied, "Well, maybe, when you get to the other place, you can tell me if he's there." That little girl had a clear idea about who is ending up where in the afterlife. So what is our thinking about who enters heaven?

Some people have the simple idea that good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell. This idea is grounded in the basic Old Testament principle that God rewards the good and punishes the wicked. As it is said in the book of Proverbs, "Be assured, those who are evil will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will be delivered." (Proverbs 11:21) In a fundamental way, this idea connects with what we have considered so far about heaven. We have noted that the essence of heaven is to be in fellowship with God. People who are righteous are living in harmony with God's will, and thus they are in fellowship with God and are on the way to heaven. People who are in sin are not in fellowship with God, because sin is disobedience to God and a turning of the heart from God. Thus sinners are on the way to hell. The only problem with this dynamic is that we are all sinners! As Paul said, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) So if the righteous go to heaven and sinners go to hell, heaven is going to be very empty.

The problem is resolved by Jesus Christ, who comes to rescue us from our sin, so that we can be forgiven and made righteous in God's sight. Even though we are sinners, we are saved from sin and death when we put our faith in Christ and receive His cleansing grace. As Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me." (John 14:6) It is Christ finally who opens the way to heaven by reconciling us with

God. Thus the basic New Testament principle is that those who have faith in Christ are enabled by His grace to enter into heaven, while those who reject Christ, remaining in sin, are necessarily in hell.

This leads many Christians to the simple idea that Christians are going to heaven while non-Christians go to hell. In theological terms, this is called “exclusivism”—the idea that heaven is exclusively the realm of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as personal Savior. This idea seems to be required by Jesus’ statement, “No one comes to the Father but by me.”

Yet many Christians are uneasy with the exclusivist outlook, because it appears to run contrary to several major Biblical principles. The exclusivist view means that most people in the world will end up in hell; but this runs contrary to God’s purpose, which, as we noted previously in this series, is plainly stated in I Timothy—“God desires that all people be saved.” (I Timothy 2:4) Currently, of the total world population of about seven and half billion, 2.2 billion are Christians. So if only Christians are saved, God is falling well short of God’s desire, since more than 5 billion people are heading to hell. Is God O.K. with this?

This leads us to the second major problem with exclusivism, that it runs contrary to the love of God. If God truly loves all humanity, as is clearly declared in the Scriptures, how can God consign so many people to hell, including a great number of people who are genuinely trying to come to God, but who are doing so in non-Christian religions? This then brings us to the final major problem with exclusivism, that it is contrary to the justice of God. We know that if someone grows up, for example, in a Hindu home in a remote part of India, that person is very likely to be a Hindu. So how is it just or fair for that person to be judged for not professing faith in Jesus when the person was born into a setting where Hindu faith is natural and a Christian profession is highly unlikely? Can our eternal destiny be so strongly shaped by where we happen to be born?

So we have a dilemma. The exclusivist position rightly troubles us because it runs flat out counter to the Biblical picture of a just, loving, and purposeful God. At the same time, the exclusivist view appears to be demanded by the statement of Christ that “No one comes to the Father but by me.” The apparent problem is resolved when we recognize that too often in our thinking we make Christ too small.

People tend to equate Christ with Jesus of Nazareth. But Christ is not Jesus’ last name. Christ is eternal; Christ is, as the gospel of John says, “the Word of God”—that aspect of God by which God speaks, and by which God creates. As the opening of John puts it, “In the beginning was the Word [namely Christ], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him.” (John 1:1-3) Christ is in the beginning—long before Jesus of Nazareth appears on earth—and whenever God speaks or whenever God creates, that is Christ. Ultimately, Christ becomes incarnate—as John says, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John

1:14)—Christ enters into humanity as Jesus of Nazareth, and people rightly said of Jesus, He is the Christ. So in Jesus, Christ is among us, and the Word of God is perfectly expressed; but at the same time Christ is much bigger than the earthly ministry of Jesus. Christ the Word has been speaking throughout time; indeed early theologians of the church noted that whenever the Old Testament prophets perceived something of God’s Word, that was Christ. In fact, the gospel of John says that Christ the Word speaks in every person’s heart—whenever anyone anywhere perceives anything of the truth of God, that is Christ. As John put it, Christ is “the true light that enlightens every person.” (John 1:9) So whenever people in other religions perceive anything of the truth of God, even if they don’t use the term Christ, that is Christ the eternal Word speaking to them. This was exactly Paul’s argument when he spoke in Athens, and he said to the Athenians, who were pagans, “I see that you are very religious.” (Acts 17:22) He noted that they had an altar “to an unknown God” (Acts 17:23); and he said, “Let me tell you about this unknown God,” and he went on to tell about how God had created all people with the intent that they might search for God and find God, and how God had ultimately acted through Jesus Christ. (Acts 17:26 f.) So Paul affirmed that the Athenians were perceiving something of the truth of God, that is, something of Christ, as they recognized the reality of God and as they searched for God; in short, he did not condemn the Athenians for their paganism, but affirmed that there was some measure of the truth of Christ already within pagan religion, and he built on that by sharing with the Athenians the full story of God’s action through Jesus.

This means that as we relate to people of other religions today, we do not need to condemn them or take the position that they are somehow in utter falsehood. We can affirm that they are perceiving something of the truth of God. Indeed this explains why there is so much commonality among religions—why it is that even within a diversity of specific beliefs, there are core moral and spiritual principles that are often very much the same. If Christ is the light that enlightens every person, then it ought to be that people everywhere will perceive some of the same moral and spiritual truths, which is exactly what we see.

So what can be said about the spiritual condition of people in non-Christian religions? If, as they perceive something of the truth of God, they are being enlightened by Christ the eternal Word, this means that they are responding to the working of Christ, even if they don’t claim to be Christian. Karl Rahner, a prominent theologian of the last century, argued along this line that devout non-Christians, who respond to what they perceive of God’s truth and grace within another religion, could be considered “anonymous Christians,” in that they are responding spiritually to Christ the Word of God, even though they do not call themselves Christians. And if people in other religions are responding at a deep spiritual level to Christ, could the eternal salvation that Christ wins for humanity be extended to them?

Jesus appears to speak directly to this question in the passage we heard from John chapter 10. There Jesus calls himself the good shepherd [*I am the good shepherd John 10:11*], and he speaks of how the sheep hear and follow the shepherd's voice [*The sheep hear his voice John 10:13*]. Note the parallel here with the idea that Christ is the Word, and people hear and respond to that Word. Jesus speaks further of how he will give his life to save humanity; as he said, "The shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I lay down my life for the sheep." (John 10:11,15) Then he makes a striking statement, as he continues, "I have other sheep who are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." (John 10:16)

In the original context, Jesus was speaking to people who were all Jews. First century Jews could readily identify with the shepherd and sheep imagery, since the twenty third Psalm, as well as other Old Testament passages, used these images already. God, in the Old Testament view, is the shepherd, and when Jesus calls himself the good shepherd, he is clearly claiming identity with God, which is true if he is in fact the Christ, the Word of God made incarnate. The sheep, in the understanding of first century Jews, would be the people of Israel, people who have faith in the God of Israel. In the first century Jewish understanding, Jews can be saved; non-Jews are lost. But Jesus directly challenges this understanding when he says, "I have other sheep who are not of this fold."

Jesus was saying to them, "You may think that you are the only ones who are going to enter into God's Kingdom, but God has bigger plans. There are other sheep out there beyond this Jewish fold who will hear my voice and be saved." Of course, we see this playing out as the gospel goes out into all the world, and many Gentiles—non-Jews—will hear the gospel message and respond in faith. Christians often want to draw the line at this point and say, "O.K., we now are those "other sheep"; we are the descendants of those Gentiles who heard Jesus' voice and have received his salvation. Case closed." But what if we hear Jesus' message afresh as a living Word that speaks to us also: "I have other sheep who are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." Then we are moved to believe that people today outside the Christian fold who are responding in their own way to Christ the Word can yet be included in the salvation that Christ brings to humanity.

This does not mean that we adopt a simple universalism which says that everyone will go to heaven no matter what they believe or do. We have already noted in this series that such universalism does not make sense. The idea that everyone will go straight to heaven, though it has some popularity nowadays, runs directly counter to the justice of God; for how can it be that someone who commits great evil on earth will just vault at death into the reward of eternal paradise? The idea that everyone goes straight to heaven also runs counter to the very nature of relationships. We have noted in this series that the essence of heaven is to be in fellowship with God. Those who have a relationship with God now naturally continue that relationship after death; but for those who are alienated from

God, does it make any sense that they would suddenly be yanked after death into a loving relationship with God, even though they neither knew nor cared about God during their whole life? Finally, the idea that all people go straight to heaven goes totally against the Biblical principle of human freedom—which is that God gives us the freedom to choose for or against God. So if people choose against God, it would be a complete denial of their freedom to just blast them into fellowship with God in heaven anyways. Thus, as we have seen during this series, it makes sense to affirm, along with the New Testament, that it is possible after death to be in heaven, which is eternal fellowship with God, or in hell, which is alienation from God.

Yet we have reason to be much more cautious than that little girl in the John Wayne story when it comes to passing judgment about who exactly will be in heaven or hell. We can affirm with the New Testament that entry into heaven is possible only through Jesus Christ; and at the same we can affirm, as we have seen this morning, that people outside of the Christian fold may yet hear the voice of Christ the Word, however imperfectly, within their own faith traditions. We know that there are many people who are Hindus or Muslims who are trying to choose God, who are seeking a relationship with God, and who are trying to live justly. Can it be said of them that they are also sheep who are hearing the Word, however distant, and that Christ will bring them also into God's eternal Kingdom? No one comes to the Father, no one comes into heaven, except through Jesus Christ, but it may be that his flock is bigger than we sometimes imagine.

So if Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists might yet enter by the grace of Christ into heaven, what does all this mean for how we as Christians relate to the world? It means that we still passionately share the message of Jesus, for if Jesus is "Word made flesh," he is the full revelation of God's truth and the center of God's saving action, and thus we are called to proclaim the whole story of Jesus to the world, just as Paul did in Athens. At the same time, we do not have to make the claim, as Christians sometimes do, that all non-Christians are going straight to hell—a claim, which, I believe, is more damaging to the proclamation of the gospel than anything. Instead, we can affirm those ways that other people are reflecting the truth and love of God; and for our part, we can take hold of the saving grace of Christ, we can share with others the good news of Christ, and we can leave the final judgment to the Lord.