

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
July 17, 2016
©2016

I'm Not Sure About A God Who.... 6. Would Damn People for Not Believing

John 14:1-6, 11-12 15 NRSV "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And 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. 4 And you know the way to the place where I am going." 5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" 6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.... 11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. 12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."

1 Timothy 2:1-4 English Standard Version First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

This week, an interesting picture came across my Facebook feed. It was a picture of an Eskimo captioned with the following dialogue: Eskimo: "If I did not know about God and sin, would I go to hell?" Priest: "No, not if you did not know." Eskimo: "Then why did you tell me?" There's a whole lot of Christian history and difference in perspectives embodied in that exchange. In fact, from the very earliest days of the Church, there was a difference in opinion about the ultimate fate of those who didn't know the Gospel or those who never had the opportunity to hear it preached or those who did but did not in fact then believe in Christ. The very old Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory is not simply an odd nether-world-ish place created to worry people, but in its intent was meant to offer people every possible chance – even after death – to believe in Christ and "be saved." Of course, notice something: That way of formulating it assumes that those who don't explicitly choose to believe in Christ, or as the old language has it, "confess Christ" will in fact be damned and eventually sent to eternal

hell by God.

That point of view, in fact, was the basis for one of the most disturbing funeral sermons I had ever heard. The minister recounted, near the beginning of the sermon, a conversation that he had had with the grieving widow, the one now sitting there in the front pew surrounded by children and loved ones. He said that the widow had asked him *"Will I see him again in heaven? Will he be waiting for me?"* And then he told everyone there in the packed church his answer: *"Probably not,"* he said – to both tears and not a few gasps in the audience. *"Probably not, for he wasn't a Christian and as much as I know you'll miss him he's more than likely in hell for refusing to believe that Jesus was his savior."* It was one of the more cruel moments I have ever experienced.

Our gospel scripture for this morning is one of the most beloved texts in the New Testament. It is regularly read, and rightly so, at funerals. Many people can quote it and take comfort in its language and some, raised on the King James Version, will hold near to their hearts the line *"in my Father's house are many mansions."* But it can also be a troubling scripture – and that funeral sermon from that minister, however cruel and inappropriate it was, did zero in on the most troubling aspect of these verses: ***"No one comes to the Father but by me."***

Last week I quoted the great Disciples preacher Fred Craddock; let me do so again today. Craddock, in his down-home southern way, once said that both the Bible and the history of the church could be seen as the story of the tension between two guiding principles: "Ya'll Come," on the one hand, and "Quality Control," on the other. It is indeed a tension that runs throughout the Gospel of John, and in fact, throughout the whole Bible: IS God's love **particular** or is it **universal**? Will only *some* be saved or will *all* be finally saved? John's depiction of Jesus is full of this tension; we can see it even in just these few verses for this morning. For, on the one hand, Jesus says *"In my Father's house are many rooms, many mansions"* – implying, it might be argued, that

there may in fact be other ways to salvation that lead to other rooms in God's infinite life. After all, Jesus says elsewhere in John *"I have sheep that are not of this fold."* But on the other hand, Jesus says *"No one comes to the Father except by me."* On the face of it, that seems rather restrictive! Or consider the beloved John 3:16 – *"For God so loved the world that He sent his only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but shall have eternal life"* – with its apparent restriction of eternal life to those who believe. Yet that verse is followed in the very next verse with this line *"God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved...."*

Particular and universal. Restrictive and non-restrictive. Indeed, **"Quality Control"** versus **"Ya'll Come."** How do we understand all this? Well, there are generally two kinds of responses that folks have made to this this tension. One sociologist says this: there is the "...pluralist position ... that there **is** salvation in other names [besides Jesus'] and Christians should simply drop [this] language ... and [there is] the **ex**clusivist position that the words must be asserted straightforwardly: there is **no** salvation in any other name."¹ Let's look more closely at that first response, the **in**clusivist, pluralist one – those who would say that there are a variety of paths to salvation, and that the *"many rooms"* and *"many mansions"* language includes anyone who has a **sincere** belief. These are the folks whom you will often find saying, ***"Well, aren't all religions really heading for the same place? Aren't they all equally 'valid'?"*** It's the attitude expressed in that famous "Peanuts" cartoon where Charlie Brown says *"It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere."*

The problem with this approach is simply this: It **does** matter, it matters a great deal, what you believe. A preacher by the name of Dan Clendenin forcefully explains why it does matter. Listen carefully to his words: The problem, he says, with complete

¹<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=241> Emphasis mine.

and utter inclusivity is that

Some religious views and practices are clearly false, harmful, and even despicable. I'll never grant David Koresh religious [equality] with Mother Teresa. I don't think that Aztec human sacrifice and Buddhist almsgiving can expect equal allegiance. Hindu widow-burning, female infanticide, ... and the mass suicide of 913 people at Jim Jones' "People's Temple" ... all strike me as badly wrong.

Or, take another example, when Warren Jeffs – the leader of the fundamentalist Mormon sect based in Colorado City, Utah – directs that girls of twelve and thirteen years old be turned over to men to use and abuse and impregnate and tells them that if they resist these “marriages” they are going to hell, is this just one more religious lifestyle choice, one that’s equally “valid” with others? I don’t think so. And neither, I suspect, do most of you. Rev. Clendenin nails it, I think, when he says this: “So, *pluralism that consistently treats all religions as equally valid comes at the **unacceptably high price of endorsing the diabolical as well as the divine....***”² Endorsing both the diabolical and the divine - not what any of us wants to do!

Well, if easy inclusivity, if “**Ya’ll come**” run rampant, if thinking that the Father’s house has so many rooms that **anyone** who believes **anything** and does **anything** can find lodging there so long as they are “sincere” is **not** what we want to affirm in the face of such despicable practices, what about the opposite view? What about the view that says, indeed, that there is no other way to salvation than through the “correct” sort of belief in Jesus Christ and that those who don’t do so are damned and will spend eternity in hell? Is that where we want to go instead? That point of view leads to the kind of funeral sermon that I experienced. It logically leads to the conclusion that your Muslim friend, your Buddhist family member, your Jewish doctor, your nephew who claims to be an atheist, and on and on and on, will be punished forever for not having the “right” belief. But my friends, I cannot go *there* either – and I suspect that neither can you. Such a view seem so utterly at odds with the God who is the gentle shepherd,

²<http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20080414JJ.shtml> Emphasis mine.

the God who, even though he can rightly get very angry at the folly and sin of human beings, still would not want any of them to be lost forever. Such a view seems so at odds with the God, as it says in our other scripture for today, who “desires that all people be saved.” It seems so at odds, indeed, with that central truth of the Gospel that God IS love unconditional for each and all.

So what shall we do at this seeming impasse? For we can't seem to believe **either** an easy **inclusivity** that says that every religion is somehow “equally valid,” **nor** can we believe that God would damn for eternity good people who happen not to be Christian, or who happen to have the “wrong” sort belief or interpretation. So what shall we do?

Consider this statement: the **meaning** of any *answer* depends entirely on the meaning of the **question** you are asking! When you say to someone “How are you?” you likely aren't asking in the chemical sense and would not expect someone to answer you listing their chemical constituents. When someone asks you the question “How's it going?” they do not mean for you tell them in an astronomical sense, reciting the various speeds that they are moving with respect to the earth, the sun, and the galaxy. The reason that we seem to have ended up at an impasse between easy inclusivity and restrictive exclusivity is that we too often we come to this passage with the implicit question: “*Okay, God, who is in and who is out?*” This is part of our sinful human condition – we are sometimes too quick to focus on and even obsess about drawing lines to put some on the outside and some on the inside. But this is not the question that Jesus is answering here. In fact, we need to return to that question as the story has it and remind ourselves of the meaning of the question that Jesus is in fact actually answering! That question was NOT “Who's in and who's out, Lord?” No, it was Thomas' question: “How can we know the way?” *How can we know the way?* What a VERY different question! This is not a question about who's in and who's out; no, this

is a very personal question about the meaning of **my** life, about how one can truly find goodness in this world, about how you can truly find and experience God. *Do you hear the difference?*

To make a long story short, what Jesus says to those questions is this: *“You will know Me not by having certain beliefs, but by how I am at work in the lives of other people to bring about goodness, to bring about hope, to bring about meaning.”* And so that line *“No one comes to the Father but by Me”* isn’t the description of an admission requirement; no, it is a description of the fact that you and I will indeed know God through how Jesus is at work in our lives and in the lives of others. Jesus then says something extraordinary that ought to tell us for sure that Jesus isn’t trying to draw a tight circle between in’s and out’s when He says this: *“Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.”* **Did you hear that?** There is absolutely no requirement here of believing the “right” doctrines or saying the “right” words about Jesus. No, seeing God’s love in the lives of those whose actions express His goodness — **that’s** what Jesus is inviting us to do in this passage, and that’s how we shall know Jesus!

I know that some of you here are adult converts to Christianity. And what I strongly suspect is that most of you didn’t first come to Christianity **just** because of its beliefs, important as those are, but because of the **relationships** you had with people in whom you recognized a Godly goodness at work, through whom you therefore learned what Jesus is like. We come to our fullest knowledge of God through the way Jesus is manifested in people, in the relationships that we have. None of us comes to the Father, none of us know God, **except through the way that the life of Jesus is made manifest in other people.**³

³Bishop William Wilimon’s words on this topic are worth quoting at length here: “As a Christian, I embrace [Jesus] not because of my belief in universal human goodness or my perception of the commonality of our faiths, but because I am trying to follow a Master who came

And so, because we **have** known God through the face and voice and hands and love of Jesus made manifest in other people, we can also claim that **wherever** good springs out of evil, **wherever** hope bubbles up despite despair, **wherever** folks transcend selfishness and are self-sacrificing, **wherever** peace outwits war, **wherever** a good person takes a stand against hatred and hostility, **wherever** joy overcomes jaded joylessness, **wherever** folks say “No” to xenophobia and fear, **wherever** any human being speaks out for the vulnerable and the powerless – **wherever** these things happen, we thereby know Jesus, we know *God at work*. Whether it’s a Buddhist, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, atheist, or whatever, wherever such fruits are found, we recognize Jesus, we know God at work. God is at work in many ways and in many lives to overcome and redeem the despicable things done in His name. Jesus is at work **wherever** love is at work. And God loved – and continues to love – this world so much that God’s own son became one of us, and, in Rev. Roy Howard’s beautiful words, Jesus “...is the one who heals the broken-hearted without regard to eligibility, who opens his arms to the vulnerable... and to all those on the margins.”⁴

To such wonderful news, I can only say: thanks be to God. Amen.

to me, a stranger, and embraced me as a brother, and who bids me do the same to others. The truthfulness of my faith must be judged on how well it teaches me to live without murderous fear or nihilistic despair. Without the resources of the Christian story I simply don’t have the resources to live peacefully in this violent world.... [T]he truthfulness of any set of convictions is not in their alleged “universality” but in their practical force, the sort of lives they produce. Christians like Desmond Tutu and Mother Teresa of Calcutta are the only evidence we have that Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life.” Christianity is not another philosophy or some primitive system of belief; it is a community of people who worship the Jew whom Pilate sent to the cross.
<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=64>

⁴http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/OTHERS/John/14.01-8_LetNot_Howard.htm