

May 6, 2018
Sixth Sunday of Easter
“Controversies of Our Faith: Salvation”

This sermon is based on *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2014. See Chapter 30.

I heartily recommend Rev. Hamilton’s wonderful book. I am covering only a small portion of it, and there are many treasures in it you will discover if you buy and read it.

I would also like to refer you to *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, by Rob Bell. New York: HarperOne, 2011. This book offers a more complete exploration of Christian inclusivism.

Scripture quotes are from the *New International Version*.

I’d like to tell you a true story about a funeral I heard of. A young woman became gravely ill and was expected to soon die. Her family wasn’t religious, but felt like they should call a pastor. Someone knew someone who was clergy, and so he came to her bedside. By this time, she was confused and moving in and out of consciousness. The pastor emphasized the importance of her “coming to Christ” and professing her belief before she died, so that she could be assured of getting into heaven. The pastor therefore tried to evangelize her as she died. At her funeral, he shared with the congregation that he couldn’t be sure she understood what was being said, and agreed to accept Jesus, so he sadly didn’t know whether she was in heaven right now.

This story makes me very uncomfortable. We all recognize this theology—it’s what most of us have been taught all our lives; but, was the pastor’s judgmentalism and rigidity really necessary? Where was Jesus’ love and forgiveness? Where was the hope and encouragement that family needed to hear?

We have been told as a basic part of our faith that we must accept Jesus as our Savior in order to be saved. We have always assumed this meant that we need to invoke the name of Jesus and call ourselves Christian or else we are going to hell—a place of eternal, fiery torment. I confess to you that I struggle with this theology, and stories like the one above add to my struggle. It seems like humanity, in our brokenness and diversity, faces so many obstacles to faith. And if our God is really a God of love, shouldn’t love, not fiery torment, be the last word?

Adam Hamilton, in his book referenced above, has a different take on this, one I find intriguing. I’m going to preach today from his perspective, and like I’m all in with his position. My goal isn’t that anybody will be influenced to change their mind; rather, my goal is that we will all have some new ideas to think about, and new ways to ponder God’s love and purpose for humankind.

Rev. Hamilton begins with John 14: 1-6:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

For most Christians, now and through the ages, this means that unless a person accepts Jesus as their personal Savior, they won’t go to heaven. But it’s possible this is not exactly what Jesus meant. He makes a beautiful, meaningful statement when he says, “I am the way the truth and the life.” It may be helpful to recall that this is one of John’s famous “I am” statements. Through these particular passages, John points to Jesus’ divine nature, and also to the God of the Old Testament, who claimed the name, “I am who I am.” (see Exodus 3: 14) In using this “I am” statement, John hopes the reader will make the connection between God and Jesus.

Now the second half of that passage: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Hamilton points out there are two ways to interpret this. One of these is that Jesus is telling us the fate of non-Christians; that is, if a person doesn’t accept me as Lord, they can’t come to God, and will be forever separated from him. This is the traditional view of this verse.

But there’s another way to look at it. It could be read to say, “No one comes to God unless it is through my work of salvation.” There is an important difference here. In the traditional view, what’s important is what the person does—the decision to follow Christ or not. In this second point of view, the important action belongs to Jesus—he is the one who does the saving work.

Jesus speaks here very shortly before he is arrested, tried, and sent to the cross. ***It seems likely that he is talking about what he is going to do, instead of what people do to get saved.*** If that’s the case, then this verse is saying that no one who goes to heaven can get there without Jesus’ action on the cross—Jesus is a bridge over which everyone who gets salvation will walk, whether they know it or not.

This brings us to the next big question: What will happen to non-Christians after death? There are three main categories of thoughts on this.

One is called **pluralism**. It posits that **all people will go to heaven**; God will save every human, allowing none to be lost. That sounds pretty good...except what about those people who were truly heinous—those who purposefully did awful things to hurt others and never repented? Are they going to be enjoying heavenly life with the rest of us?

We know that God gives us freedom to make choices, and perhaps there are those who refuse God's gifts of his kingdom, both in this life and the next one. God never forces anyone to do anything, and it's hard to see him forcing someone to be saved. C. S. Lewis said, in his book *The Problem of Pain*:

I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside.

In other words, even if God offers salvation to all people, there may be those who are so deeply entrenched in evil that they do not accept it; and hell describes that experience. So, it seems likely that not everyone gets to heaven.

A second school of thought is **exclusivism**. **This states that the only people who receive salvation are those that have accepted Jesus as their Lord**. God holds out the gift of salvation to us, but it must be personally accepted in the name of Jesus in order to take place. All others are sent to hell, including faithful people of other religions.

A third view is called *Christian inclusivism*. Here's how Hamilton defines this:

Christian inclusivism affirms that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the source of salvation. His death was for the sins of the world. **But God can give the gift of salvation to anyone he chooses based on the criteria he chooses.** It is possible, according to this view, for God to give the gift of salvation to those who have sought to love and serve God even if they had never heard the gospel or had not fully understood or accepted it. He can give it to people who had heard the gospel but for whom it did not make sense, or who heard it poorly, or who were raised in another faith and simply could not imagine the faith their parents had taught them was not true. This view is clear that Christ is the Savior of the world. But his salvation is given by God as God chooses.

p. 250-251, emphasis mine

This view makes it possible that God can examine the hearts of the faithful of other religions, see a desire to love God and neighbor, and to know the truth, and so save them.

We are reminded by the inclusivist position that the gospel tells us that salvation is a gift from God. Paul affirms that it is only grace that saves us:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2: 8-9

Grace is God's mercy, forgiveness, love and compassion that he shares with us. And the amazing thing is that God gives them to us even though they are completely undeserved. They are a free gift.

Jesus told us that if we really have faith, there will be fruit of it in our lives.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

Matthew 7: 21-24

This makes me wonder what happens to people who call themselves Christians, but who don't really have Jesus in their hearts. If a "Christian" is mean, judgmental, stingy, and vengeful, are they saved? And what about non-Christians who are kind, patient, generous and forgiving? An inclusivist would say that God has the choice of saving the non-Christian.

Hamilton sums it up:

The inclusivist perspective seems both more consistent with the character of God revealed in Jesus and more just. It allows human beings to reject salvation, but also allows God's mercy to judge everyone according to their heart and their faith. It removes the idea that there is a magic prayer that must be spoken and if only you say the right words, you will be accepted to heaven, while billions who earnestly sought to love God and neighbor yet did not know to call upon the name of Christ will be tormented eternally in hell.

p. 252, emphasis mine

One question remains: If the inclusivist position is correct, then why be a Christian? Does it really matter if you follow Jesus as a religion, as long as you follow his Spirit of loving God and neighbor? Why bother telling people about Jesus?

Here is the answer for me, personally. ***I believe a life of studying, worshipping and imitating Jesus Christ is the best kind of life anyone can live.*** It's the life that brings us closest to God, and closest to his Kingdom of grace, love, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, hope and peace. It is the fullest, most whole and joyful life we can live. If you follow Jesus, you will live righteously, justly, compassionately and with joy and hope around every corner. And the world will be a better place for everyone because you do. I believe that Jesus IS the Way, the Truth and the

Life. In him is every grace of God, and he shares that with us abundantly. There is no other faith or creed that can do all that. I want it for myself, for you, and for every neighbor. And so I am convinced God wants me to share all of it I can with everyone I can.

I am also convinced that ***our God is a God of self-sacrificing love, a love God wants to give to all his beloved children; and all people are his beloved children.*** I cannot claim to know who is saved, but I trust that a God of such abundant and profound love will never abandon any who long for him.