

## **The Liturgy for July 12, 2020**

**The Question to be addressed:** *Now, about the Afterlife.....!*

### **~Thought for Meditation:**

*That's what makes it special. I won't exactly know what's going to happen after I die. Nothing more human than that. Besides texting people that you're five minutes away when you haven't even left the house.*

Michael, "The Good Place"

**~GATHERING:** It's summer. Some heat...some rainfall for our gardens. A time we have been waiting for over a long winter. And an even longer pandemic. And despite our need for precaution, still our hearts stir with something like joy when this time of year rolls around. So, in celebration, I greet you today with worship theme of the After life: heaven and hell. You're welcome. Actually I want to thank two people in particular for this question, one is a not-quite-four year old and the other is an adult over 60, let's say. Yes, both had the same question. And I think that makes it profoundly important, because it tells me that it is a question we ponder throughout our life.

So thank you Tenley MacBean and Floyd Ross.

### **~LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE**

### **~CALL TO WORSHIP**

Grace, peace and mercy be yours. Let's worship together.

### **~OPENING PRAYER ENDING WITH THE LORD'S PRAYER**

We trust that you, O God, are our eternal dwelling place, and that underneath us are the everlasting arms. May that be enough for us in this moment, in this time, as we enter into worship. And hear us now, as together we pray the words of Jesus, saying:

**Our Father who art in heaven,**

**Hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come,**

**Thy will be done,**

**On earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread,**

**And forgive us our trespasses,**

**As we forgive those who trespass against us.**

**And lead us not into temptation,**

**But deliver us from evil,**



**For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,  
For ever and ever. Amen.**

**~Scripture: Philippians 1: 20-22**

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.

**~Reflection:**

**\* THE APOSTLES' CREED**

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.  
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;  
who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell;  
the third day he rose again from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Ghost;  
the holy catholic Church;  
the communion of saints;  
the forgiveness of sins;  
the resurrection of the body;  
and the life everlasting. AMEN.

***from thence he shall come to judge the quick[living] and the dead.***

We utter this line from the Apostle's Creed, the earliest of our statements of faith. A statement that we interpret to mean the separation of peoples at the time of death: Saints "this a way" (heaven)

Sinners "that a way" (Hell).

Going up? OR Going down?



Even if society is moving away from a claimed Christian faith, we still know what that means don't we? That judgment will prevail as reward for the good" and punishment for the wrong doers.

No where is this depicted more graphically perhaps, than in the Sistine Chapel. Now, we are mostly familiar with the famous ceiling art by Michelangelo, aren't we? But on the altar wall in that ancient chapel is a mural called The Last Judgment: a wild and glorious fresco also done by Michelangelo (I've attached a link).

So, this idea is in our Creeds; it is in Christian chapels, surely this must be biblical, right?

Well, in reality, the idea of an eternal heaven or hell is not taught really anywhere in the Old Testament. And it's not what Jesus believed or taught. So, the question is, why did this become the dominant view?

### **Developing Heaven:**

Well, it didn't – at least not for a very long time. At the time Christianity emerged most Jews didn't believe there was a soul separate from the body. That idea came from the Greeks. Jews understood body and soul as fully intermingled, inseparable. In a creation story of Genesis, God made humankind out of the dust of the earth. God then breathed holy breath into it (*ruah*). This breath is the life force....When you die, the body stops living. But so too, there is no more breath...or soul. In Hebrew scriptures, for the Jewish tradition, the soul doesn't go anywhere – it is gone. As in: Dead. Jesus, being a faithful Jew was immersed in this notion. He didn't believe there was an immortal soul.

Now...how is that sitting with you, I ask?

Because I am remembering a study that we did oh, 11 years ago I think. The question emerged about "what happens at death." And everyone present in the room –and I do mean *everyone*– spoke about the body being just a shell; that the body dies yes, but the soul, our deeper being, our essence lives on, goes to heaven. There was thoughtful conversation, but absolute confidence in this room as to what happens. That's when I spoke. "Well, you know, that wasn't Jesus' understanding. Nor was it even the earliest church understanding. Jesus as a Jew understood that at death we die completely. Body AND soul. No instant division of body and immortal soul that goes directly to heaven. Rather, a resurrection, a raising of the dead would come at a later time, when God would put an end to the forces of evil, and create



the new Kingdom of God..or kin-dom as it is sometimes expressed: the Beloved community, here on earth.

I might as well have said we will all go and live together on Mars and eat cake and oranges all day. Every pair of eyes looked at me in that kindly way you look at a small child, or someone from another planet. No takers. You were - I'm sure still are - all Greek dualists. Which is where the church did eventually go....

But they didn't get there biblically or through the stories of Jesus. It was much more of a created doctrine that emerged through theologians and context. Which brings me to Paul.

Paul, like Jesus, was a Jew who thought there would be an eternal life for those who followed God but it *wasn't* that your soul died and went to heaven. They believed in a resurrection of the dead. At the end of time, God would bring in a new kingdom on Earth, a bodily kingdom, and accompanying that is a resurrection of the dead. Those who died before this came, would also receive it. They'd be raised from the dead. That's what Jesus and Paul thought.

Until Paul starting changing his ideas.

Mostly, this was because he and others all thought that this new Shalom, this wonderful sort of heaven on earth was immanent. It would be here any moment now! And then nothing happened. Life went on. Terrible things and suffering along with some beautiful times and mundane moments. But the new restored place with God wasn't happening. Paul begins to realize, and this shows up in his later writings, that he may die before the resurrection comes. He begins to wonder "Well, what happens to me in the gap? In this time between my death and the great resurrection of the dead?" He ended up thinking that surely since he's so close to Christ, there will surely be a *temporary residence in heaven awaiting him when he dies*, and then when the resurrection comes, he'll come back into his mortal body, which will be made immortal.

This starts the idea that you can exist after death without your body. Or, the new Christian idea of heaven. This new doctrine had legs to it pretty quickly, because most of Paul's followers were Greeks, gentiles who became Christians. And in the Greek worldview they had lived in, the idea that there was a soul that lasts forever was mainstream. And before long the Jewish/Jesus version of the resurrection of the dead drifted off.



OK...so that is the emergence of Heaven in the developing Christian Church. Heaven came first. Later comes the companion theology of...Hell.

### **Developing Hell:**

The

word Hell, as we might think of it now, does not appear in the Hebrew scriptures. The word *sheol* does. But it is a mistranslation to read it as “hell.” It almost always refers simply to the grave, to the place where all dead bodies are placed. It is the “ending place.”

Likewise, in the New Testament we hear Gehenna translated or read as “hell.” But Gehenna, or the Valley of Hinnom, was an actual place, in the southwest valley, on the south side of the City of Jerusalem. It was quite literally a burning trash heap: it is where people tossed garbage. It was certainly used as a metaphor on the choices we make as human beings: will we live and move in violent ways? Or will we choose life giving ways? But it was not used as a way of describing an immortal place of punishment, the way we think of hell. It too, developed over time, from the notion of immortal souls in heaven.

So...if the immortal soul can go to heaven for we “good folks”....what about the others? Those not on “our side?” Logically, if good folks were being rewarded it would only follow that these others must be punished.

Sometimes we love judgment, don't we? And yes, we can find scriptural references to this, especially in Matthew. And yes, Jesus talked of the coming kingdom of God where the people who suffer for doing what's right will be rewarded. Jesus talks about the people who *aren't* rewarded with the kingdom of God. But he says they will be “destroyed.” He has parables about that. He'll talk of (a farmer) separating the weeds from the good crop and he'll burn the weeds in the furnace. That's what it will be like for sinners — they'll be burned. But the thing about weeds is that when they burn, they go out of existence. They're gone. That's what he thought would happen to people. They'd be gone. There was no idea of torment or punishment after death. The early Christians didn't have that. It's not until you start getting so many Christians raised in Greek culture that you have the idea that some will be rewarded and some punished. After all, if Greek thought was of an immortal soul, it meant that either reward or punishment would be endless...eternal. But again this developed long after Jesus.



Unfortunately this notion of judgment has kept on developing. Religious people really like to divide up the world it seems into Right and Wrong; who is in and who is out; our side versus the others. I think if we take this as our starting place, then we've lost the whole plot, the heart of our scripture.

Do we see God as someone who loves us, yes, but unless we say the right things and do the right things, and pray and believe in certain proscribed ways, then ultimately God judges us for our wrongs and will then punish us forever? I agree with Karl Barth, who said "that's like being offered the Gospel, the Good News, at gunpoint!"

I know...the argument against me is this: if Jesus forgives and accepts everyone, then why be good? It's too easy. Grace is funny like that.

All through the sacred stories the biblical trajectory for me is about a people and place that God calls good, very good. And every time God threatens to give up or to punish, God always forgives and let's us start again. This is that taste of heaven, here and now. Heaven is grounded in this world where we all get to make the choice to choose life, to choose love of God and earth and neighbour and stranger and self, here and now. And for some it perhaps ends there when we take our last breath. Maybe there is nothing more. Maybe our returning to the earth of our beginnings, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, is a sense of returning to God. Maybe that is all. We cannot know with scientific certainty.

But I will also tell you this:

I have sat with so many folks through death and loss. Religious folks and non religious folks and those on the edges still peering in; some who have firmly stepped outside. And yet....

When they speak of their understanding of what happens next: it almost always emerges as hope: sometimes proclaimed sometimes whispered: but a vision of something more; of an eternal love; of everlasting arms; of glad reunion with God and the ancestors who have gone on before: parents and spouses and friends and 4 legged saints, who please God will come to greet them at the end, and lead them to something that looks like home.

Amen.



**~A Time of Prayer (from *A Song of Faith*, UCC 2006)**

We place our hope in God.  
We sing of a life beyond life  
and a future good beyond imagining:  
a new heaven and a new earth,  
the end of sorrow, pain, and tears,  
Christ's return and life with God,  
the making new of all things.  
We yearn for the coming of that future,  
even while participating in eternal life now.

Divine creation does not cease  
until all things have found wholeness, union, and integration  
with the common ground of all being.  
As children of the Timeless One,  
our time-bound lives will find completion  
in the all-embracing Creator.  
In the meantime, we embrace the present,  
embodying hope, loving our enemies,  
caring for the earth,  
choosing life.

Grateful for God's loving action,  
we cannot keep from singing.  
Creating and seeking relationship,  
in awe and trust,  
we witness to Holy Mystery who is Wholly Love.  
Amen.

**~Benediction:**