

August 6
Heaven/Hell
John 3:16

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

It may seem like a silly question to ask a bunch of folks participating in a Christian worship service at First **Christian** Church of Orange, but I'm going to ask it anyway. What is a Christian? What does it mean to be a Christian? How has your understanding changed throughout your life?

Many of us, who grew up in the church, were taught that heaven is the reason for being Christian. Personal sin is the problem and forgiveness is the solution. Because we are sinners, we deserve to be punished, but Jesus took our punishment for us, he was sacrificed for our sins. He died for us. The emphasis is very much on Jesus' death.

This way of understanding Christianity, through the lens of heaven and hell, is prevalent in our hymnals and in church liturgy. Many sincere Christians hold this understanding and have never thought to question it. It doesn't make them hateful or judgmental. They are still able to hear the call of Jesus to love one's neighbor and to forgive as we have been forgiven. They don't dwell on hell and leave space for a more gracious outcome for those who don't know Jesus. I say this because I want to be careful and respectful to those who find life and meaning in this understanding of Christianity.

John 3:16, is for some, the summation of what it means to be Christian, as if that is all you need to know. Just believe that Jesus died for you, and you will go to heaven when you die.

But, is that really what this verse is saying?

For many, the idea that God so loves the world, but will send to hell those who don't believe in Jesus, makes no sense. And the idea that God had to sacrifice God's own child, to appease God's own wrath, is horrifying. For some, this way of understanding what it means to be Christian, and the way it gets lived out, is a deterrent to Christianity. And now, with the tools of modern scholarship we have good reason to question if it was part of the original Christian message.

Mark Twain once said, "Heaven is a bribe and hell is a threat." What do you think? Is our Christian faith about reward and punishment? Is that really the best motivation living a Christian life? And what does it communicate about the nature of God? Is God only concerned with personal sin?

If you understand Christianity only through the lens of heaven and hell, reward and punishment, it impacts the way we understand the language of our faith. In the framework of heaven and hell: **Salvation** means life after death. **Saved** means saved from our sins. **Savior** refers to Jesus saving us from our sins. **Sacrifice** is about Jesus' death as payment for our sins. **Mercy** is about God forgiving us. **Repentance** is about remorse for our sins. **Redemption** is about Jesus redeeming us from our sins. **Righteousness** is about personal obedience. **Peace** becomes an internal state of being. **Faith** is believing in a set of statements.¹

What happens, however, when you study these words and consider them outside the heaven/hell framework, you discover they don't mean these things.

There is another way to understand these beautiful words of our Christian faith. There is another way to read John 3:16. There is an alternative to the heaven and hell way of understanding what it means to be Christian.

First, it helps to know that doctrines of heaven and hell have evolved, and scripture does not provide the details we assume are there. In scripture the word the King James Version of the bible translated as hell, is actually four words with nuanced meanings. In the Hebrew Bible the word sheol is used, but it doesn't suggest a place of eternal torment. In the New Testament, there are three Greek words, Gehenna, tartarus, and hades. Gehenna was an actual place, a giant burning landfill. Tartarus, found only once in 2 Peter, was a place where Greek Gods sent other Gods for punishment and where, according to 2 Peter, God sent sinful angels. Hades is the Greek realm of the underworld where, in Greek mythology, everyone went when they died. Hades occurs 10 times in the New Testament. Only one of those times does it suggest a place of torment and that is within a parable. (see Luke 16).² Long story short, the Bible isn't clear about the afterlife, heaven or hell, but it has much to say about this life. Even the language of eternal life emphasizes a present reality, not something we receive in the afterlife.

It was Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. that said, "Some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good." While that quote seems a cynical it sheds light on the fundamental flaw of the heaven/hell way of understanding Christianity. It places the emphasis in the wrong place – on Jesus' death rather than his life. It places the emphasis on the personal rather than the communal aspects of Christianity. It places the emphasis on believing the right things over living in the way of Jesus.

The alternative to the heaven/hell framework is progressive theology. It has been aided by modern scholarship. It involves:

- studying scripture in its original context,

¹ Marcus Borg, "Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored," 1989, pp 13-14. Borg's treatment of the heaven/hell framework, though dated, is a good place to begin a conversation on Progressive Theology. There is also a short chapter in the book on John 3:16 specifically.

² <https://medium.com/christianish/what-the-hell-finding-out-hell-isnt-in-the-bible-7028acb3ecee>

- remembering that Jesus was a Jew and was well-versed in his own Jewish tradition
- learning that Jesus lived under and was killed by an oppressive empire that called their emperor Son of God and Prince of Peace
- focusing on the life and teachings of Jesus and the kingdom of God he proclaimed on earth, within us and among us
- recognizing God's concern for the vulnerable and oppressed
- the naming of collective sin and injustice
- taking scripture seriously, but not literally

When we step out of the heaven/hell framework, as hard as that is to do, we start to discover a way of life, called Christian, that is compassionate, inclusive, loving, and forgiving. Some people call this journey deconstruction because they have to tear down the heaven/hell framework in order to reclaim a new kind of Christianity.

I can remember my first days in seminary. I thought I had it all figured out. My understanding of what it means to be Christian was very much what I have described within the heaven/hell framework. Yet, as I began to critically study, that framework was shattered and for a while I didn't know what I believed. It took a long time to rebuild my faith on a new framework based on the actual life and teachings of Jesus.

So, what about John 3:16? What happens when we detach this verse from the heaven/hell framework?

For God so loved the world...the world...which is not just you and me, not just Christians, not just people, but the whole world and all of creation. God so loved the world God gave God's only son to become incarnate in the world. God didn't give Jesus to be the perfect sacrifice but rather to embody God, so that everyone who believes him may not perish but may have eternal life.

I didn't misspeak – the word translated as “believe” is better understood as *belove*. This is how the early Christians understood this word. To *belove* is to give one's heart, and loyalty, and commitment to Jesus. This is the way to eternal life. And John tells us what he means by eternal life. It's not going to heaven when you die. He writes in John 17:3, “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent.” To know God, revealed in Jesus, is to have eternal life.

For some of you, progressive theology is not new and for others, this might be the first time you are hearing someone challenge what is believed by many, to be central to the Christian faith. Wherever you are on the journey, we can benefit from doing this work together, and together do some earthly good. The hope is that by revisiting the language of our faith, without the lens of heaven and hell, we can all be better equipped to share and live the life Jesus calls us to live.

So what is the faith we affirm? It is the radical love of Jesus, whom we call Christ. It is rooted in the teachings and life of Jesus, the embodied expression of God with us. It is the love of neighbor and the inclusion of all. It is a way of life and a call to action. It is a recognition of belovedness of all people. It is doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with the God who loves this world and is with us and among us.

And whatever happens when we die....we trust in that love.