

Imagine There's No Heaven
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Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

*'See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.'*
--Revelation 21:1-4

*Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...*

*Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...*

*You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us*

And the world will be as one

*Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...*

*You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one
--John Lennon Imagineⁱ*

“Beliefs Worth Letting Go in order to Grow” is the title of my series of sermons for Lent. Perhaps that title is too strong. I don’t want to speak in terms of absolutes. I also do not want to shut down conversation before it starts. A better title might then be: “Beliefs Worth Re-evaluating in order to Grow.”

I think that is more accurate even though it does lack that rhetorical flourish.

This morning I want to address Heaven, Hell, and the Afterlife. The Apostle Paul wrote:

“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”ⁱⁱ

Paul is speaking of the Resurrection. I think to evaluate this statement from Paul we will need to distinguish Resurrection from the afterlife. I think that one can trust and affirm in the Resurrection even if one doesn’t believe in an afterlife. I am going to speak about Resurrection on Easter Sunday. This morning I want to speak about the afterlife, the survival of our consciousness or consciousness plus memory after death.

If Paul is speaking about the afterlife, and he may be, I personally have to part ways with him at that point. I think there is great value in *this* life, and

it is to *this* life that I commit myself. I don't think a person must believe in the afterlife to give this life meaning. I don't insist. I may change my mind in ten years or even after I finish delivering this sermon. I do think that coming to terms with heaven, hell, and the afterlife and re-evaluating what we think about it is important for spiritual growth. That is valuable regardless of your conclusion.

Why do we even have a concept of afterlife? Why have human beings created the idea of heaven, hell, reincarnation and so forth? What do these beliefs do for us?

Joseph Campbell, the great mythologist, said that the first conscious thought was, "I am." It was a euphoric thought. I am! I exist! Joy! But the second conscious thought followed closely, "Someday I will not exist." I am leads to I am not. The thought, "I am not" creates anxiety. I am and I want to be I am forever. I am not is the end of I am.

Enter religion in all of its forms. Maybe there is a way to beat the I am not. Perhaps even though this life ends, I somehow continue. That is one explanation for an afterlife.

Another explanation has to do with the injustice and unfairness of this life. The great wisdom literature of the Hebrew scriptures, wonderful writings such as *Ecclesiastes* and *Job* address the problem of injustice. Why do the good suffer and the wicked prosper? The first painful rule we learn is that life is rarely fair. And that is not satisfactory. If justice is unattainable in this life, then perhaps in the next life all of us will get our just desserts. Notions of karma in the eastern traditions and heaven and hell in the western traditions developed in response to the injustice in this life. Systems of belief and practice developed as a way for us to secure a better standing in the next life.

Heaven and Hell in Islam, Christianity and its derivatives represent ultimate and eternal justice, reward for the good and punishment for the wicked.

Two things at least are at work in this business of the afterlife, anxiety for our end, and the dissatisfaction with injustice. All of this has been presented to us as divine mandate. God, we think, through sacred texts and revelations, set this all up.

As humanity continues to grow, we begin to realize that we have created the god who has created us. We just forgot. We have developed the stories, the doctrines, the beliefs in response to dissatisfaction and fear. We are moral beings. We want the good. We want life, justice, and peace. We have told and continue to tell ourselves stories about these things. They are good stories. But they are our stories. They are our ancestors' stories. They are stories that have developed over time. We are shaped by these stories, for the most part unconsciously. Humanity has created the god who has in turn created us. That god continues to create us.

When we become conscious that humanity is the creator of the gods and of the stories of the gods, we can begin to evaluate these stories. Which of them are still worth telling? Humanity has discarded and changed these stories. We might not have known that we have done so, but we have. People have ceased to believe in and worship Baal, Jupiter, or Pan, at least in the sense that they think they are real beings. Once these gods were real. The point is that we continue to change the stories and the gods and their names. That is good. We do not need to be imprisoned by stories that do not help us.

Hence, "Beliefs Worth Letting Go in order to Grow."

Hell is the easiest one for me to let go. With the exception of using it as a swear word or as a symbol for suffering, cruelty, and despair, I have dispensed with it. The idea that God would send people to hell doesn't make sense to me at all. It is a cruel doctrine. The idea that god, as biblical scholar Robert Price put it, who is a cranky theology professor and gives out big rosy "F's" to those who don't have their beliefs correct and sends them down the chute to eternal fire is weird.

However, not everyone is ready for that. If a belief in hell is the only thing that keeps you from dealing drugs or killing your neighbor, then by all means, keep believing it. If you haven't developed a moral compass on your own nor dealt with your own anxieties, then simply ceasing believing in hell may not be the best thing for you. That is true with all beliefs. If we do not come to terms with the feelings underneath them, then we will simply substitute one belief for another.

We held a sleep-over for the youth this weekend. We went to the Bonnie Kate and watched "Bridge to Terebithia." It was about a boy (twelve years

old or so) who befriends a new student, a girl. They spend their afternoons creating a fantasy place Terebithia. Through their imaginative play they fight trolls and bad critters. But the imaginative play gives them courage to deal with the bullies at school and other fears. I won't spoil the film for you, but it also deals with tragedy and death. It is a good film to take your kids, grandkids, nieces or nephews. It is a good film that can serve as a conversation starter about issues that adolescents face.

My favorite scene occurs after the boy invites his friend to his church. "You will hate it," he tells her. But they go. It is a typical fundamental church. After the service is over they are in the back of the pickup on the way home. They talk about religion. The boy has been indoctrinated with the belief that the Bible says that if you don't believe in the Bible and in Jesus you will go to hell. The girl doesn't believe that and she says, "I don't think God spends his time sending people to hell. He is too busy creating this!" And she waves to the wide beautiful world that is all around them. The line that acts as a refrain for the entire film is, "Close your eyes and open your mind."

If we let go of hell, we may need to let go of evangelism. What is the point of trying to save people if they don't need to be saved? Imagine if all religion gave up that one. No need to convert people to our system of belief.

Heaven is a bit more complicated. As a minister I know that many people find comfort in the idea that they will see their loved ones again or that they are in heaven and at peace. The idea that heaven is a better place, when this life seems unbearable can be a great comfort. If that belief works for you, then keep it.

That sounds perhaps too pragmatic, but I think what works is a good way to evaluate our beliefs. If believing that when we die, there is a better place enables us to get up in the morning, breathe more deeply, enjoy this life better, then by all means believe it. I would add that if there is a heaven, then it is for everyone, including those people we don't like too much.

As far as other beliefs regarding the afterlife, such as reincarnation, or transport to a parallel universe and so forth, I am agnostic. I am not against it, I just don't know. How can I? Again, I am pragmatic. If it works, then believe it. We might, even so, ask why it is important for us. What fear or dissatisfaction does a belief in an afterlife address? We might ask

ourselves, do I really need this belief? Again, if you are not ready to address the underlying feelings, be careful about discarding beliefs. They serve a purpose even when we are not conscious of the purpose.

My concern with beliefs about an afterlife is that they can (not necessarily so, but they can) lead one to devalue this life. This is my problem with the Apostle Paul when he writes: *If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*”

Paul, as I read him, did not have a great value for this life. He advised people not to get married because the end was coming. He wrote some wonderful things. But not everything is a keeper. His was an interim ethic. This life is not good, it is coming to an end, so live this one in preparation for the next one.

I don't see things that way anymore. I think that this life is a good life and we should pay attention and enjoy it. Not only that, but we should work to make this life better for others too. We should live as if Earth is our home, because it is. Not only is it our home, but it is the home for all of life as we know it. It is the home for our future generations. I do not devalue life or Earth. It is a good place to be. Selling it short for some belief in an afterlife is irresponsible.

Even if there is some kind of existence after death, this one is still unique.

I like the story by Chaim Potok, a Jewish writer. He tells the story of a young boy and his grandfather. They see on the curb a dead bird. The boy, whose name is Asher, is about six or so, asks his grandfather, “Is it dead, grandpa?”

“Yes,” his grandfather answers.

“But why?”

“All things that live must die.”

“But why?”

“Because that is the way God made the world, Asher.”

“Will you die, grandfather?”

“Yes.”

“Will I die, like that bird?”

“Yes, Asher, but not until after you live a long and beautiful life.”

“But why? Why must we die? Why can't we live forever?”

“Because life is precious. That which is precious does not last forever.”

Even if there is an afterlife, this life is precious. We will never live this life again.

I still retain the symbol of heaven. I love the poetry from *Revelation* of a new heaven and a new Earth. It inspires me to dream of a world in which “mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” I don’t dream of it as if it will come true completely for me or others. Mourning, crying, and pain are part of life, too. Maybe we can dream of a way to soften some of the pain and comfort those who mourn.

I love the stories of the Bible, the stories about Jesus and the stories about a new heaven and a new earth. I love them because they are imaginative stories of hope that can help us, if we understand them as stories, to enjoy what we can in this life and to work so that others can enjoy it as well. It inspires me to dream and to imagine. As John Lennon sang:

*Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...*

*You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one*

I retain the symbol of heaven, not as afterlife, but as quality of life. Heaven for me is Presence. Presence of mind, presence of love, presence of God. Heaven within is what John Shelby Spong calls the courage to live fully and to love wastefully.

I want to play another song for you. It is a romantic song about romantic love. But as with all music and art, it says more than it says. To me, it is not about romantic love alone, but the quality of love that makes life beautiful. This is Earl Grant with “Imitation of Life:”

*What is love without forgiving?
Without love, you're only living
An imitation, an imitation of life.
Skies above in flaming color,
Without love, they're so much duller
A false creation, an imitation of life.
Will the sound of the lark sound half as sweet
Would the moon be as bright above
Everyday would be gray and incomplete
Without the one you love
Lips that kiss can tell you clearly
Without this our lives are merely
An imitation, an imitation of life.*

I want to close with one final story. I hope I am not telling tales, but I want to tell you how I was inspired by my last visit to Cornelia Heath. Miss Cornelia is in a rehabilitation home recovering from a serious setback. She has been there for nearly three months. She doesn't like staying there, but she is grateful for the place and she admires the staff. For those of you who have experienced recovery and therapy after surgery, you know it is exhausting and painful. Recovery never seems to come as quickly as you expect or wish. Many people would just as soon give up and decide it isn't worth it. Miss Cornelia is not ready to do that yet. After all, she is only 99. She is up in her chair. She goes to therapy every day. She gets around on her walker. She says that by the end of March she plans to go home. Her dream is to sit in that back pew where she likes to sit and worship. I believe her. And I believe in her. And I want whatever that stuff is she has in her. She has good genes certainly. But she also has something else. I call it Presence. She'll tell you that it is the presence of God.

She loves life too much to give it up just yet for an afterlife. May we all be so blessed.

ⁱ <http://www.bagism.com/lyrics/imagine-lyrics.html>

ⁱⁱ I Corinthians 15:17-19