

Do I Really Have to Believe *That*? Theology Gone Awry

Do I Really Have to Believe in Heaven?

John 14:1-7

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Today is the fifth and final installment of our sermon series “Do I Really Have to Believe That?” Together we’ve tackled creationism and literal biblical interpretation, predestination, forgiveness, the existence of hell, and, today, the reality of heaven. Someone who has been worshipping with us from a distance, from another country, actually, emailed me to say, “Jenny, you know, you haven’t really offered any absolute answers. You’ve just created space for nuance. You’ve just given us room to breathe.” I think that was intended as a complement. That’s how I decided to receive it, anyway.

Because here’s the thing: I believe that faith is a conversation, not a conclusion. Faith is not something you achieve, and then set it aside on a shelf, because you’re finished with it. The great Maya Angelou — I love this story — she said in an interview once, “I’m always amazed when people walk up to me and say, ‘I’m a Christian.’ I think, ‘Already? You already got it? I’m still working at it.’”

What God wants for us, what Jesus offers us, is a living faith — one we’re still working at, one that grows and changes as we grow and change. What I believe today is not the exact same as what I believed 20 years ago. And I hope that what I will believe 20 years from now is not the exact same as what I believe today. I hope and I pray that I will continue to learn and experience new ways of understanding God all the days of my life. I hope and I pray the same for you, too, all the days of your life.

All the days of your life... All the days of my life... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.

Those words from Psalm 23 lead us right into the question of heaven. Psalm 23 and John 14, the passage Deborah read a few moments ago, these passages are some of the ones we most associate with heaven, in part because these are some of the passages we read most often at memorial services, at times when our need to believe in heaven is especially strong and incredibly urgent.

The truth is, I don’t know any Christians who don’t want to believe in heaven. But I know plenty of Christians who aren’t sure they want to believe in a heaven that’s for Christians only.

After all, it’s right there in the Gospel of John: “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Those words, which sound like good news for those who believe in Jesus, end up sounding like bad news for those who do not. And that raises all manner of questions. Is Christianity the only way to God? What about other faith traditions? What about family members who have no interest in any sort of religion? And what about friends who grew up within the Hindu or Muslim tradition and what about our neighbors, our far-away neighbors, who, depending on where they are born, might never be exposed to Christianity at all? Is our good news their bad news?

There are some who understand the Christian faith to be the great arbiter, the plumb line, the litmus test... whatever image or metaphor you prefer, there are some who understand the Christian faith to be that which determines who is in and who is out, at least when it comes to God, particularly when it comes to the love of God. My college roommate, the one I told you about last week, she subscribed to this way of thinking. For many, a professed faith in Jesus Christ is essential, not because it might bring comfort and hope, not because it might teach love and compassion, but because it is the only way to wind up on the right side of the so-called pearly gates.

Because like Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

I know that’s what he said. But I think we have to give very careful consideration to what that actually means.

You see, John’s gospel was written to and among faithful Jewish folks who were having a debate amongst themselves about how significant Jesus was. Some Jews of that time thought that believing in Jesus as anything more than a wise teacher was a departure from faithful Judaism. As they understood it, anyone who followed Jesus was leaving their God behind, their God of Abraham and Isaac and Sarah and Jacob. And so those folks drew a line, and they said, “If you are with Jesus, you are no longer with us.”

Another group of Jews, though, they believed that following Jesus was not a departure from following God, but rather a continuation of following God. When they looked at Jesus, they didn’t see an alternative to God of their ancestors. When they looked at Jesus, they saw anew just how deeply the God of their ancestors loved them — enough to bring the same love in a different way.

“No one comes to the Father except through me,” is really Jesus saying, “To know me, is to know God. And to know God, is to know me. The relationship my Father has with the world is different now, and that is because of me, but my Father is the same God you have always known him to be, and that is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Sarah and Jacob.”

Gail O’Day, long considered one of the foremost experts on the Gospel of John, she says that while this text is almost always used to express a sort of Christian exclusivism, what it actually points to is particularism. That to know and follow Jesus is to experience God through the incarnation, which is a very particular expression of divine love.¹ A very particular expression of divine love that does not claim to be the only expression of divine love.

The Jews who were following Jesus at that time — the ones expelled from their community and their tradition — they were told, “You have left our God behind.” What they were trying to say when they wrote this Gospel down was, “We haven’t left our God behind; we’ve just discovered that our God is bigger than we imagined.”

So do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

And pay attention to this: the text says we come to the Father through Jesus, not through belief in Jesus. Those are two different things. My belief does not save me; Jesus saves me. Because Jesus reveals just how much God loves the whole world. Jesus shows us how the love of God extends to all of creation and assures us that God desires to redeem everyone and everything, because the love of God has no limit, no border, no barrier.

Now, don’t misunderstand me. Belief matters. Our belief in God comforts us, guides us, instructs us, challenges us, shapes us, grounds us, calls us, and directs us. Our belief is responsible for much of who we are and how

¹ Gail O’Day in the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary.

we live, and that is no small thing. But our belief is not what saves us. Nothing less, and nothing more, than the grace of God is what saves us.

So not let your hearts be worried, and do not let them be afraid.

"In my Father's house there are many rooms..." This new expression of God's love is one that embraces familial language. It is not God's love at a distance, it is God's love up close, God's love manifest in proximity and relationship. "In my Father's house," Jesus says, drawing a direct connection between himself and God. But then he says, "No one comes to the Father..." because that language of family isn't just his anymore. The language of family, the language of being God's family, well, because of Jesus, that is extended to all people, too. To belong to God, to be claimed by the love of God, is to become part of the family of God.

And if we trust that for our future, it shapes how we see others and treat others in our present, especially when we are faced with the temptation to make our own determinations about who is in and who is out.

Because remember that second group of faithful Jews? The ones cast out of their own tradition, their own homes? They were told, "You're wrong, so you can't be with us anymore." And they could have done the same. They could have said, "No, we're right, you're wrong, and you know what? You can't be with us, either." But they didn't. What they said was, "God's love is big enough for all of us."

They were changed by the one they followed, and they let that change the way they lived.

In February of 1997, President Bill Clinton entered the House Chamber to give the State of the Union Address. His cabinet was led into the room by Madeline Albright. She would later write about that moment, "For the first

time in history, a woman led the cabinet down the aisle between applauding Congressmen and Senators. It should have been a moment of unmitigated joy. It wasn't."²

It wasn't for her, because just days earlier she had learned something her parents never told her: she was Jewish. And not only was she Jewish, but 12 members of family had died during the Holocaust. That historic night, she was still reeling from that new information.

Later that year, in July, Secretary Albright traveled to the Czech Republic. While she was there, she visited the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague. She described it this way: "Entering, you observe what appears to be fine wallpaper covering the wall, but as you get closer, you can see that the pattern is actually made up of neat black writing listing the names of the 77,297 Czechoslovak Jews who died in the Holocaust. The Jewish officials accompanying me pointed out the names of Arnost and Olga Korbel."

The Korbels were the Secretary's grandparents. She said, "I had not foreseen that I would start visualizing my grandparents in striped concentration camp uniforms, seeing their hollow faces staring back at me. I thought about how they must have suffered, and their struggle to survive, and the torture of their last hours." And then she said, "A year earlier I had visited the same Synagogue. It looked the same now as it had then. The Synagogue had not changed. It was I who had changed."

What would happen to us — how would we be changed — how would the course of all the human history that is still to come be changed — if we realized those names inscribed on that wall are the names of our family, too?

We live in a world where it is easy, and in fact encouraged, to delineate between who is in and who is out, who is good and who is bad, who is wrong and who is right. But when our salvation comes, when the kingdom of heaven

² Madeline Albright, in her memoir, *Madam Secretary*.

arrives in the end with all its glory, I believe we will discover that the very heart of God is inscribed with the names of all people, and we will discover that we really have been family all along.

Do you really have to believe that? Of course you don't. You figured that out weeks ago, didn't you? You don't have to believe any of the things we've talked about lately. Your belief is not what saves you. It never has been, and it never will be.

Your belief is what shapes you, though. And letting yourself be shaped by the love of God, well, it won't save your life. But it will make your life worth living.