

A sermon preached the Congregational Church of Almaden Valley, United Church of Christ
San Jose, CA
Date: July 11, 2010
Rev. Kevin M. Smith
Luke 10:25-37 and Deuteronomy 30:9-14

And I Know Who Holds My Hand

*I don't know about tomorrow;
I just live from day to day.
I don't borrow from its sunshine
For its skies may turn to grey.
I don't worry o'er the future,
For I know what Jesus said.
And today I'll walk beside Him,
For He knows what is ahead.*

*Many things about tomorrow
I don't seem to understand
But I know who holds tomorrow
And I know who holds my hand.
Lyrics and Composer: Ira Forest Stanphill.*

When I was a child growing up in the Valley Church of the Nazarene in Spokane Valley Washington state we used to see that old time gospel hymn a lot. And when we weren't singing it in church we were singing it in the car with Mom and Dad on the way home from church or hearing it played on the radio by too numerous to count Country & Western bands. I think it's a beautiful song—a great melody, a simple and very comforting message, lyrics filled with a simple and profound faith and a litany of reassurance that could get you through some pretty tough days in your life. When times were tough having a belief in a heaven or an afterlife is very reassuring and comforting.

People in the United States are relatively unified in their belief about whether or not heaven exists. The famous Gallop Poll found this:

Heaven and Hell

Since 1997, belief in heaven has ranged between 72% and 83%. According to Gallup's most recent May 2004 Values and Beliefs poll*, 81% of Americans currently say they believe in heaven, 10% are unsure, and 8% do not believe. (*Getting 81% of Americans to agree on anything is really amazing! Of course, although 81% might believe in an existence of a heaven I would bet that 81% don't agree on what it is or will be like.*) (Gallop went on to find...)

As expected, regular churchgoers are more likely than others to say they believe: Virtually all (98%) of those who attend church weekly do so versus 89% who attend "nearly weekly" and 64% of those who say they attend church seldom or never. (*Also*) belief in heaven is relatively high across all other demographic groups. The relatively high religiosity of Republicans is reflected here: 90% say they believe in heaven, compared with 82% of Democrats and 72% of political independents.

Nonwhites are somewhat more likely than whites to believe in heaven (89% compared with 80%). Regionally, Southerners are somewhat more likely to believe in heaven (90%) than those in other regions are. Those with a high school education or less are more likely to believe than those with at least some college education. (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/11770/eternal-destinations-americans-believe-heaven-hell.aspx>)

Okay, let's take our own little poll this morning. How many of you believe in heaven or that there is and will be a heaven? How many of you believe there is a hell or will be a hell for those who fall short of heaven?

Okay, now let's get down to some brass tacks. For those of you who believe there is or will be a heaven what do you think it is or will be like? How about Hell?

Okay, let's ask the question the lawyer asked Jesus in our scripture story this morning. What do you think it takes to inherit eternal life (and is that heaven?)?

{Engage in extended dialogue here with the congregation...}

Okay, so here I am your pastor—the person you look to for spiritual guidance and direction, the person educated at an Ivy League seminary, a

person who spent a lot of time studying the scriptures and reading theology and what do you think I have to say about this matter of heaven and hell. Well, here it is my best:

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That is the best answer I can come up with. But, I do believe this: I believe (and remember we are just talking about “belief” here, not certainty, not science, not necessarily facts) that loving God with all my heart, and with all my soul, and with all my strength, and with all my mind; and loving my neighbor as myself is much more real, much more important, and much more the point of a relationship with God than what the future holds or not. I also know that we human can experience moments and bits and pieces of heaven and hell right here on earth and right now. When I see or experience the love of a long lost friend or get a kiss from my grandson that is heaven. When I treat something wrongly that can be hell. When I’m not honest with myself that can be hell. War is hell. Generosity, compassion, forgiveness, and justice is heaven. Transformation and change can feel like you are going through Hell, but I believe experiencing heaven can happen in the midst to transformation and can be a result of changing or as a theologian might say, engaging in repentance or a “turning around” of your heart and life’s direction.

Polls show that most people who believe in a heaven or hell believe that if you are good you go to heaven and bad you go to hell. Who knows? But the question I want you to consider and ponder and reflect upon is not necessarily about the reward or punishment equation of a good and bad life, but rather can living a compassionate, generous, life justice-seeking life have it’s own intrinsic and real-time benefits regardless of whether or not you are rewarded. Is your faith ultimately about reward or about being a good person in the here and now and letting tomorrow take care of itself?

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I hope and pray you will let God hold your hand today. Amen.

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