



**“Can I Be A Christian If . . .
4. I Believe People
Other Than Christians
Might Be Going to Heaven?”**

Text: Acts 10:1-36

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If Mark Twain had actually said everything he is credited with saying, the man would never have slept. You and I know Twain from *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. We think of him as a humorist, which is surely part of who he was. But, he was also a social critic – a voice that challenged the common assumptions of his day. And he did that in a way that often raised a few eyebrows and here and there a temper or two.

Well, this story is pure Twain. It’s authorship is without dispute. The Old Master told it frequently and Hal Holbrook has been telling it for years.

“It seems that a certain man lived all his life so that he might acquire heaven. The first person he met when he arrived there was a person who he was hoping all that time was in hell. Disappointed and outraged, the man picked up his satchel and inquired the way to hell and left.” And then Twain added this, “So there you have it – heaven for climate, hell for society.”

We’re talking about heaven this morning. Specifically, we’re talking about who gets in. Is heaven a place where we’re surrounded by fellow Christians? Or, might we be a little surprised to see some others there as well?

Now, if I haven’t riled you up in the first three weeks, this one might do it. So, pay attention. It might be my last sermon in this church. (And if that doesn’t ensure your attention, I don’t know what will!)

We’re all familiar with the idea of Saint Peter, positioned at the gates of heaven, allowing some in and turning others away. The tradition must come from the commissioning of Peter, when Jesus tells him that he has the “keys to the kingdom.” There’s nothing biblical about it. Peter doesn’t have any more say in who gets in and who doesn’t than – well, you and I do.

When it comes to the subject of who gets into heaven, “the Decider” is God. It is not left up to you and me. God is the one who opens the gates of heaven and the arms of mercy.

What we have to get over is that we don’t have any say in the matter. We have to get over that it doesn’t matter what someone says, or believes, or does, or what someone leaves unsaid, unbelieved, or undone. We cannot establish litmus tests. We cannot say that because someone never said, “Jesus is my Lord and Savior,” that they have condemned themselves. We cannot proclaim that because someone never darkened the door of a particular church – or any church for that matter – that they are unknown to God. We cannot issue decrees that say that unless you say this or do that, you’re out!

The ultimate decisions about the whole business of heaven belong to God. Decisions of that magnitude are high above the pay-grade of anyone in this room, or in any other room on this planet. What happens to any and all of us is in the hands of God alone. That’s first.

The second question we need to ask is, “what kind of Christianity are we trying to live?”

It seems like there are two basic kinds of Christianity being practiced in the world today: exclusive Christianity and inclusive Christianity. If you stop and think about it, you can figure out exactly what those terms mean.

Exclusive Christianity is a kind of Christianity that is designed to keep some people out. If you don’t believe this particular thing in this particular way, you really aren’t a Christian. If you don’t subscribe to this particular doctrine or that peculiar dogma, you aren’t an authentic Christian. Exclusive Christianity takes the good news for all people and turns it into the bad news for some people.

Inclusive Christianity, on the other hand, seeks to expand the circle of faith to include as many people as possible. Inclusive Christianity tries to find the common ground, tries to build bridges between those who are at odds within the family of faith, tries to honor and respect the image of God in which every person is created. Inclusive Christianity tries to keep the good news for all people as just that – good news for all people.

Take those two understandings to our central lesson for the morning. Peter was in a quandary. Peter was a Jew who believed in Jesus. As a Jew, he was faithful to the laws and customs of the Judaism of his day. He would not eat certain foods that were considered unclean. He would not associate with people that were considered unclean – including Gentiles. His understanding of his faith was something of an exclusive view – he was faithful and others were not.

But the events that are recorded in the lesson from Acts that we read again this morning plunge Peter into something of a dilemma. Peter had spent time with Jesus and Jesus didn’t seem to respect the carefully drawn lines that included some while excluding others. Jesus was constantly spending time with people that tradition taught he should avoid. Jesus was breaking down the very barriers that Peter was trying to keep up.

Still, God is at work with Peter. Peter has a vision of something like a sheet coming down from heaven and on the sheet was every non-kosher food from which Peter had abstained. The command came from God to Peter to eat and Peter resisted, reminding God that he had never eaten anything that was unclean. Finally, God spoke to Peter, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” The circle was expanding.

Then Peter is called to go and visit a Roman centurion and his family. Another crisis. Peter is being called to have contact with Gentiles – ceremonially unclean people who will render Peter himself ceremonially unclean. Again, the Spirit interceded and instructs Peter to go to Cornelius. Peter meets Cornelius and his family and sees that these people are, in fact, genuinely seeking the God Peter serves. Peter proclaims, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

Peter’s profound experience is that of moving from an exclusive faith to an inclusive faith. God led Peter out of exclusivism and into inclusivism. God helped Peter put away excluding some and opened the way to including all. God helped Peter see that what God calls clean, we must not call profane. God helped Peter see that what God called acceptable should be acceptable to all. God helped Peter understand that words like “saved” and “damned” are not words we should use too easily or too quickly, because God is the final judge and God is all about the business of including and not excluding.

And God helped Peter see that God is not as much into the condemning business as God is into the saving and blessing business. God is not as much an angry God as God is “full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness,” as the Psalmist reminds us. God is always looking for more people to include in the circle, searching like an old woman for a lost coin, scouring the hillside for a lost sheep like a shepherd, running to welcome a lost child home. That’s second.

The third and final thing we need to say about this business of who is going to heaven is this: what’s the rush? To listen to some people talk, they can’t wait to get there. And they are so anxious to get to heaven that, very often, they are missing the life that God gave them here and now.

My friend, Presbyterian minister, singer, and songwriter, Jim Morgan, has a line in one of his songs that says, “they are so heavenly minded that they are not earthly good.” Yep. He nailed that one right on the head.

One approach to door-to-door evangelism has you ask the person who answers the door this question: “if you were to die tonight, do you know where you would spend eternity?” First off, how rude can some Christian people be? That’s a terrible question. Second, God says who gets to spend eternity where and my hunch is that some people are going to be surprised. It’s interesting – and a little disturbing – to note that when Jesus talked about heaven and hell, the people who thought they were on the fast track to heaven were the ones in hell, and the people that seemed hell-bound were the ones in heaven. Ouch! Third, and this one really bugs me, a fixation on heaven

reduces Christianity to nothing more than fire insurance. Answer the question correctly and you've got air-conditioned comfort in the great beyond. Answer the question incorrectly and "there'll be a hot time in the old town tonight."

Maybe the question we ought to be asking ourselves is, "if we don't die tonight, do we know how we're going to live for the rest of our lives?" If the focus of our faith is all about heaven, then we begin to talk about the world as "fallen," and the oppressive presence of evil and evil people, and how nothing is any good, and wouldn't it be great if God would just wipe it all out now. Some Christian people actually talk that way. God created this thing called life and called it good and it is the greatest of gifts. What God calls "good" we should be slow to call "bad."

So, maybe – just maybe – we need to stop worrying so much about heaven and begin concentrating a little more on earth. Maybe we need to put away our obsession with trying to figure out who is in and who is out and begin living the way Jesus taught us to live, loving God and loving neighbor. Maybe heaven can wait and we can enjoy – did I say enjoy? – enjoy the life God has given us.

We're finished.

"Can I Be A Christian If I Believe People Other Than Christians Might Be Going to Heaven?" Being a Christian means following where Jesus leads and seeing God as Jesus understood God. The God I see in Jesus is a God whose mercy and loving-kindness flows to all people, everywhere. The God I meet in Jesus is open-hearted and approaches all people with open arms.

"Can I Be A Christian If I Believe People Other Than Christians Might Be Going to Heaven?" The answer is "yes." God keeps enlarging the circle. God keeps pushing back the boundaries. God keeps reaching out. God keeps welcoming. God calls creation "good" and humankind "very good." And what God calls "good" stays good – no matter what we call it – for now and evermore. Amen.



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