

WGUMC July 13, 2014  
Apostles' Creed Series

"*he descended into hell*"  
Ephesians 1:3-14

I have good news for us! The Letter of Ephesians says that we were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. Before there were any religious institutions anywhere to tell us that we were going to hell, Christ chose us to go to heaven, to be holy and blameless before him in love. [Ephesians 1:4]

And not only that, but we have been showered with spiritual blessings. In our scripture for today, note how many times we read the phrase "in Christ." We are blessed *in Christ*. [Ephesians 1:3] We are chosen *in Christ*. [1:4] *In Christ*, we have redemption and forgiveness of our trespasses. [1:7] *In Christ*, we have been gathered up into God. [1:10] *In Christ*, we have obtained our inheritance. [1:11] And *in Christ*, we have heard the word of truth, the gospel of salvation. [1:13]

So we must be pretty special. We're not Jews, but that doesn't mean that we are not a chosen people. This is the

message the author of Ephesians sent out to a church or group of churches that were full of Gentile Christians: Don't worry that you are not a Jew. For you who have been far off have been brought near. [Eph 2:13] You who have been on the outside have been brought inside. You who have been considered beyond the pale have been given the promise.

Now that is good news, but for whom? In the Church, we have assumed that the good news is for Christians, for those who are "in Christ." But clearly, the good news was first for the Jews. So we have to wonder: what about all the other non-Christians? Are they so far off? So on the outs? So beyond the pale? Is there no place for them in God's kingdom? Or, as some would say, is their home in hell?

There's something I've noticed lately. Hell doesn't seem to me to have as much horsepower these days. The threat of ending up there doesn't scare as many people into church as it used to. Yet it still scares some folks who are in the church, as

Rob Bell discovered when he was pastor of Mars Hill, the mega-church he founded in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Now Bell grew up believing that only people with a personal relationship with Jesus get into heaven. Everyone else goes to hell. But after he grew his church to 10,000 members, he started having some doubts. And he dared to ask himself, what kind of faith teaches that only a chosen few are saved? And what kind of God would save so few people he made?

Eventually, Bell's questions and his attempts to answer them became a book called, *Love Wins*. In that book, he challenges our notion of hell and pretty much everything we've been taught about who is going there.

It may be a new book, but it's not a new challenge. Mainline Christians have been asking themselves these questions for at least a century now. And, like Bell, we have reached back to early Christians like Origen and Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa, who had very different ideas

about hell. They argued that God's goodness is much stronger than our evil and God's love is far more powerful than our sin. In fact, God is so good and so loving that hell can't possibly be as full or as everlasting as some folks would have us believe. Because when it comes down to a contest between God and sin: in the end, love always wins.

A lot of us had been thinking it, but Rob Bell published it, and his book became a New York Times' Bestseller. But it was also a job killer. The controversy over Bell's hell caused a thousand people to leave his church, and the following year, he decided it was time for him to leave, too. It's sad that the one who says, "Love wins" had to lose. But all is not lost. Rob Bell is now living in Southern California and working on a new TV talk show.

You know, Bell reminds me a little of the Man of La Mancha. Preaching a more loving, inclusive God in that church was his impossible dream, but he has kept dreaming it.

Disregarding the cost, he was willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause.

Because that's just what Jesus did. At least that's what the Apostles' Creed says he did. There's a line in the Creed that we in the mainline seldom read. The traditional version goes that after Christ was crucified, dead and buried, "he descended into hell."

And we Methodists say, "What?" "Jesus went to hell?" "What the hell for?" Now, we can explain this part of the Creed by saying that in order to fully conquer death, Christ had to really die. Like everyone else, he had to descend to the dead. But the Bible suggests another reason for Christ going into hell. In a few cryptic passages in John and in First Peter, we hear about him preaching the Gospel to those who were already dead. [I Peter 3:19; 4:6; see John 5:25]

Why would the early Christians want him to do that? Perhaps because St. Cyprian, in the third century, said:

"outside the church there is no salvation." Now that would mean that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, along with Moses and all the Hebrew Prophets, as well as Plato, Socrates, and all the great philosophers who died before Jesus was born were going to be stuck in hell. But here the Creed carves out an escape for them. Sometime between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, Christ went there to preach the gospel to them.

The early Christians figured that if there were no salvation outside the church, then they were going to have to bring more folks inside the church. And that's what the Creed does. It includes all those poor souls who just happened to miss out on the Messiah.

By including this line in the Creed about Jesus descending into hell, ancient Christians extended the boundaries of the Church into the past. And that's important for us to know, because a lot of Christians today want to expand the Church in the present. If Christ could let some non-Christians in back then,

couldn't we let some non-Christians in now? The reality for us is that the world is a lot bigger and more complicated now, and a lot of us just can't imagine any kingdom of God that doesn't include all the loving people we know: our Hindu co-worker, our Muslim neighbor, our Jewish friend, our Buddhist brother-in-law.

Still, we Christians have a problem with the Bible. There are passages in Scripture that seem to shut our loved ones out rather than gather them in. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." [John 14:6] And the Book of Acts is even more explicit: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." [Acts 4:12]

Yet Jesus doesn't always talk that way. Remember the lawyer who asks him, "Teacher...what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus says to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" And the lawyer answers, "You

shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus says to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” [Luke 10:25-28] Notice that he doesn't say, "Believe in me and you will live." All he says is "Love, and you will live."

It's the same at the Last Judgment. In Jesus' story, the king doesn't ask the sheep and the goats, " Do you believe in me?" Instead, he asks them, "Did you feed the hungry? Did you clothe the naked? Did you visit the sick and those in prison? Because if you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me." In other words, if you loved them, you loved me.

[Matthew 25:31-46]

In his words and actions, Jesus redefines his own definition: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" becomes *Love is the Way, Love is the Truth, and Love is the Life*. So your Muslim friend who loves you loves the Christ in you. And



your Jewish neighbor who serves meals to the homeless feeds the Christ in them. I would argue that, despite the fact that they are Jewish or Muslim or whatever, their love for others puts them "in Christ."

What Jesus is saying to me is that being "in Christ" doesn't mean that non-Christians have to believe certain things about Christ but that they love in a certain way, a way that connects them to Christ. As First John says, "...everyone who loves is born of God and knows God...God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." [1 John 4:7, 16b]

Now love is the connection, even if my Buddhist brother-in-law doesn't know that he is connected to Christ. For the Spirit sometimes works that way: quietly, anonymously, tugging at us, testing us, gradually preparing us to receive the promise. (Wesley called it "prevenient grace.") And that, I believe, is God's "plan for the fullness of time": that eventually

all things will be gathered up in Christ, as it says in Ephesians, things in heaven and things on earth, so that we might all—and I mean "all"—live for the praise of his glory. [Eph 3:10, 12] One way or another, Love wins.

So, yes, I can believe that Christ descended into hell, because he is doing that for us every day. He is descending into my hell, your hell, and will keep doing so in order to bring every last one of us into heaven.

But until we get there, let's not be too proud of our spiritual blessings in Christ. For, as First John says, "No one has ever seen God"—not Jews, not Muslims, not Christians—but "if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us." [1 John 4:12] If Christ had to descend into hell to get that message across, it was well worth the trip. Now we can say to our non-Christian friends, "In Christ there is no East or West. In Him, no South or North. But one great fellowship of Love throughout the whole wide earth." Come on in!

