

From the Pastor's Desk

A Religion of the Afterlife

"Have you been saved?" Engelbert asked Isabel, a friend he recently met in college. They were having coffee together after class in the Student Center. "What do you mean?" Isabel asked, "saved from what?" Engelbert was getting nervous. This was the first time he had been so aggressive with his faith. He had been attending evangelism classes in his dormitory and Isabel was the first person he had approached. His friend Rudolph was quite proud of the number of people he had evangelized and Engelbert wanted to do the same, so he pressed on. "You know", he said, "when you die are you sure you're going to heaven?"

Isabel was a college senior and this wasn't the first time someone had asked her this question. Her response surprised Engelbert. "Ask my friends if I am saved," she said. "Ask my roommate Sandy, my brother Joseph, my sister Susan or one of my teachers. Why are you asking me? I could say anything. If I am saved, they would see it in my life."

Engelbert wasn't prepared for this response. He stared at his coffee cup, looked up and said, "Ya, I suppose. But don't you want to be sure you're going to heaven? I mean, it's all about the afterlife. What you do now determines where you will spend eternity. If you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you will know you're going to heaven. I have a prayer in my wallet you can pray with me now and then you will know for sure." He pulled out his wallet and began looking for the prayer.

Isabel was beginning to feel uncomfortable. She felt Engelbert was judging her. "Yes", she said, "I believe I'm saved but Christianity is about much more than going to heaven. Turning it into a religion of the afterlife cheapens it. What about the teachings and example of Jesus' life? In the last judgment scene he says, 'I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was naked and you clothed me, in prison and you visited me.' Saying your prayer presumes this is not important. If you look at what Jesus says, salvation is much more than saying your prayer."

Engelbert looked disappointed as he put his prayer back in his wallet. "Its not like I don't think prayer is important", she said, "but I feel our faith is about more than that." "I suppose", Engelbert said, "but we can't earn our way to heaven. No matter what we do, it won't get us into heaven. All you have to do is accept Jesus. I have the prayer right here," he said while reaching again for his wallet. "No thanks", Isabel said as she stared at her coffee.

Isabel looked up at Engelbert and said, "Why do you think Jesus was killed?" "He was killed because God sent him to die for our sins," Engelbert said. "And all you have to do is accept him as your Lord and Savior and you can go to heaven."

"The reason Jesus was killed", Isabel said, "was because he crossed dangerous social and religious boundaries and associated with people his authorities considered condemned and nothing but trash. He broke Jewish religious laws in order to show compassion and tried to expand the understanding that God's love extends to non-Jewish people too. This infuriated those in

power and that's why he was executed. If you remember the tremendous hatred some white people felt toward Martin Luther King Jr. because of his work to promote equal rights for black people, you get some idea of what Jesus was up against. Those in power felt executing Jesus was the best way to silence him and maintain their lifestyle of privilege."

Engelbert put his wallet back in his pocket and said, "So Christianity is not just about praying this prayer?" "It is if you don't want any trouble", Isabel said. "You can pray all you want, but try to change society to be more just and you will experience what it is to be crucified."

"By the way", Isabel said, "Some friends and I are going to a Health Care Rally tomorrow in the Union Square to encourage health care be provided to all Americans, especially the poor. Would you like to go with us? If you can't make it, maybe you would like to join us next Tuesday when we will meet with Professor Johnson to talk about immigration reform and the compassion of Jesus. If that doesn't work for you, on Thursday we are going to discuss how the proposed budget cuts are going to impact services to the mentally challenged and people in nursing homes. On Sunday we will be meeting to promote ways of lowering the number of abortions. You are welcome to join us if you can."

Engelbert sat quietly staring at his coffee. Isabel continued, "How you perceive Jesus' life and death determines your Christian mission in life. If you believe Jesus came only to die so we can go to heaven, your mission will be about the afterlife. If you believe Jesus died as a result of his passion for poor and marginalized people, your mission will be to have a similar passion. The King Herods of this world prefer Christians focus on the afterlife." "Why is that", Engelbert asked. "So they won't be forced to be mindful of the poor when the govern," Isabel said.

"So Christianity isn't only about the afterlife." "That's right", Isabel said, "following Jesus means having a passion for someone other than yourself. It means picking up your cross and having the heart of a servant. It means taking responsibility for our society and striving to make it more just, especially for poor and marginalized people. Social justice is as integral to Christianity as oxygen is to air."

"So, what about heaven?", Engelbert asked. "That's God's concern", Isabel replied. Come, let's give ourselves away as bread for the poor."



Who is this Emmanuel?

In what way does he challenge you?

What is your passion?

A child has been born for us. We have been given a son to be our ruler. He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father and Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6

~ PB