

I remember the first time I heard about heaven. I was about five years old and my great-uncle Fritz, who lived in Danville, Illinois, passed away. There were five kids in our family, and my parents were discussing whether or not our entire family should attend his funeral. Despite my intense lobbying, it was decided only the oldest three children would go, that my little brother and I were too young to make the trip, and would instead stay with a neighbor.

I asked my mother, "Where is Uncle Fritz now?"

My mother said, "He's in heaven."

The day for the funeral arrived. My parents and older siblings left early in the morning and pulled back up in the driveway shortly after supper that same evening. I ran out from my neighbor's home to greet them.

"How was it?" I asked my mother.

"It was sad," she said. "But I'm glad we got to go. It was good to see Uncle Fritz one last time."

I was very confused. I had just been told the day before that Uncle Fritz was in heaven, which I thought was up in the clouds, only to be told it was in Danville, Illinois. I was in Danville, Illinois last year. It didn't look like heaven to me.

To this day, whenever I hear anyone talk about heaven, a little five-year-old voice whispers softly in my ear, “It might not be so.”

These past few months we’ve been reflecting on some basic theological principles. Today, I want to talk about our destiny. I want to do that by telling you a story about a friend of mine, Tom, who has attended church all his life, and this past summer lost his only brother to cancer. Tom told me about his brother’s funeral, how person after person had come up to him, hugged him, then said, “Your brother is in a better place.”

Tom would thank each person for coming, chat with him or her for a moment, then greet the next person.

“But what I wanted to tell them,” he said to me afterwards, “was how much Bill loved this place, how much he loved life, how much he loved his wife, and nieces and nephews, and mother. Then at the funeral, the priest talked about heaven. And God bless him, he’s such a nice guy, but what does he know about heaven? What do any of us know? It makes me wonder what else the church has told me, that it doesn’t know the faintest thing about.”

Jim Mulholland and I were in Toronto a few months ago speaking at a Lutheran Church about universalism and progressive Christianity. One evening, we were having dinner with the pastor and she told us about a Lutheran pastor in Canada named Richard Holm, who the Lutheran Church in Canada had put on trial, charging him with heresy for teaching and preaching Universalism. But we Universalists are nothing if not hard to pin down, and he was acquitted of that charge. He was found guilty “of stating with certainty that of which we can not be certain.” Now get this! His punishment for stating with certainty that of which we can not be certain was to be sent back to seminary, where presumably they only teach what they know for certain.

If stating with certainty that of which we can not be certain were a crime in the church, we’d all be on trial. Do you know how brief the average sermon would be if pastors only spoke about the things we knew for certain? We’d be out of here by eleven o’clock every Sunday.

Nowhere is our uncertainty so vast as when we speak about our destiny, and the afterlife. We simply don’t know. Six years after writing about a book about God saving every person, I’m sometimes embarrassed by the certainty of its tone. I spoke a bit too boldly about things I could not possibly know with any confidence. I confused my hopes for facts, and theory for certainty.

We talk with certainty and passion about an afterlife because the prospect of death is unsettling. It's frightening to imagine our lives will some day conclude, so we create alternatives to death—heaven and hell and purgatory and karma and Nirvana and reincarnation and paradise. While these concepts can be comforting, we risk a loss of credibility when we dogmatically insist on something we don't know for sure. Consequently, people like my friend Tom can't help but wonder what else the church has taught that might not be true.

What if we in the church vowed never to affirm as sacred truth something we hadn't experienced ourselves? This has been a tenet of Quakerism since our earliest days—that as a matter of integrity we are not compelled to accept as truth a doctrine or belief we have not experienced firsthand. This was the basis of George Fox's response to William Penn when Penn asked the pacifist Fox how long he, Penn, might wear his sword. "Wear it as long as you can," Fox told him. Meaning, to wear it until his inward experience of God compelled him to remove it.

What if this were the sole criteria for Christian life—we could not make any theological or spiritual assertions unless we had experienced them firsthand or knew them to be empirically, observably true.

I tell you this not to discourage you or rob you of hope. But to remind us that many thoughtful people no longer see the church as a

credible community which might enhance their lives, and one of the reasons is because they believe the church's pronouncements have no basis in reality. We have been dogmatic when a little doubt might have been in order. When persons did not share our certainty, did not affirm our convictions, we said their doubt was an affront to God.

But what if Christianity were not about beliefs, what if it were not about doctrine or dogma or canons or creeds? What if Christianity were about conduct? About lifestyle? What if Christianity were simply about how we treated one another? How we lived on this earth? What if Christianity wasn't about aspiring to heaven after we die, but about helping to create a heaven on Earth while we were alive?

Early in its life, the church decided believing certain things about Jesus was more important than being like him. If we believed all the right things about Jesus, we would go to heaven when we died. Meanwhile, this life (Which, incidentally, is the only life we know with any certainty even exists.) this life was to be endured, was to be suffered though, was to be tolerated, in hopes of a better life after we died.

I was talking with a man not long ago who was lamenting the state of our world. “I guess it will never be perfect until we’re in heaven,” he said, and with that one statement excused himself from our shared responsibility of creating heaven in this world, of bringing justice in this world, of building peace in this world, of achieving harmony in this world, of enjoying oneness and belonging in this world. Far too many people, for far too many years, have concerned themselves with a heaven after we die, dismissing the possibility of a heaven while we yet live. Is it any wonder that thoughtful people looks less and less to religion to bring heaven to earth?

It is staggering to realized how seldom Jesus talked about heaven. Though he did talk, quite extensively, about what we could do to bring heaven to earth. In his most famous prayer, he expresses a hope for God’s kingdom to come on earth, as it is in heaven. He didn’t want us to pine for some far-off heaven. He wanted us to bring it about now. This would happen, not by believing certain creeds, but by living a certain way.

By loving our enemies now

By being truthful now.

By forgiving now.

By working for justice now.

By experiencing wholeness and unity and community now.

How will we know we've reached this heaven? There'll be signposts along the way. When the hungry are fed. When the poor are valued as much as the wealthy. When the lonely are befriended. When, as the Reverend Joseph Lowery reminded us this last week, tanks are beaten into tractors. That's when we'll know heaven has come to earth.

A friend of mine died a couple years ago. Just a tremendous man, who had a rich, full life. Never had a lot of money, but had a big, huge heart. Spent his life in service to others. I went to his funeral, and was talking with his wife afterwards. Funerals are always such a test. You want to comfort someone, so you speak from your heart, without first running it past your head.

I said to her, "I know you'll see him again someday."

She looked at me. She said, "You think? I'm not betting on it." Then she added, "But that's alright. I had my heaven with him right here."

Whether there is a heaven after we die, I do not know. Wouldn't it be wonderful! But I'm not sure. So I'm going to live as if this is the only heaven there is. I'm going to enjoy this life, and work as creatively, joyfully, and graciously as I can, to make it heaven for other people.

What could you do to bring heaven on earth to someone else?