

(Note to leaders: This week's "Diving Deeper" section has a lot. Please save at least 15 minutes to have discussion about the reading.)

Opening

Eternal Life

Check-in & Introductions

Prayer of Confession

(Choose one person to lead the group in this prayer of confession from the United Methodist Book of Worship)

O Lord God, the watchers of Zion have called peace, peace, when there was no peace.

Wherefore have you so long withheld from us the influence of your Holy Spirit?

Why have you hardened our hearts?

It is because we have honored you with our lips, when our hearts were far from you.

Return again to us, O Lord God, and pardon this iniquity of your servants.

Cause your face to shine upon us, and we shall be saved.

O visit us with your salvation.

Raise up sons and daughters from Abraham and Sarah, and grant that there might come a mighty shaking of dry bones among us, and a great ingathering of souls.

Be pleased to grant that the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ may be built up: that all nations and kindreds and tongues and peoples might be brought to the knowledge of the truth, and we at last meet around your throne, and join in celebrating your praises. **Amen.**

(MARIA STEWARD, AFRICAN AMERICAN, U.S.A., 19TH CENT. ALT.).

Scripture

Epistle Lesson

Romans 6:12-23 (NRSV)

¹²Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³No longer present your members to sin as instruments^[a] of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments^[b] of righteousness. ¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

¹⁵What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, ¹⁸and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations.^[c] For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

²⁰When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. ²²But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. ²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the Charles Wesley quote "love is heaven" mean to you?
2. Define "eternal life" in your own words.
3. Unpack the statement "Eternal life is not a spiritual abstraction; it is a way of being in the world, here and now." How do you agree or disagree?
4. Dr. Eboni Marshall Turman, Yale Divinity says that the idea of heaven as only a future, "otherworldly" promise is a "tool of appeasement meant to sedate the fury of the oppressed." What do you hear her saying? How do you agree or disagree?
5. In our sermon this week we heard, "When I think that the simple act of loving another person can help to bring a little bit of heaven to the world, that's just about the best thing ever." Where do you see people bringing heaven to earth? Where do you see people loving each other really well?
6. How can we bring more heaven to earth? What would it take for you to love more people or to love others better?

Diving Deeper

(Take turns in your group reading through and then reflecting on the Diving Deeper section)

For our diving deeper section this week we are going to look at two theological concepts that are direly needed in our world today. These concepts have not been deconstructed or been given emphasis in the modern history of mainline white churches in the United States of America. I acknowledge that I am painting with a broad stroke in that statement. As a scholar and pastor, attempting to write an accessible All Church Study, I admit my lack of space and therefore consideration when talking about such important topics. Nonetheless, I am going to try.

These two theological concepts that we will look at today are **embodied theology**, and a **theology of the cross**. I will not cover the broadness of these topics, but just a few (very few) smaller aspects that are helpful for our conversation inspired by this week's sermon.

Our sermon this week talked about eternal life being something/somewhere that is actually present *right here*. Heaven does not *need* to be conceived as some far-off distant place. We can talk about heaven and salvation as being present, *embodied*, right here. In the same vein of talking about *where* heaven is, we can talk about *when* heaven is. Life eternal does not need to be perceived as only a *future* hope, but as a *present* reality *in this time*. We can talk about *when* and *where* heaven exists, and we can embody that in the present moment in our very flesh.

When scholars discuss "heaven on earth," or the "future hope," or the "end times," the place where all people sit at Christ's table together...they are talking about *eschatology*. Eschatology is theological study of the end times, the realized hope for all of God's creation.

This week's sermon had a quote from womanist theologian (black feminist) Dr. Eboni Marshall Turman. The original and unedited quote is very academic but we will deconstruct it a bit. She writes:

"CRITICAL consideration of heaven and hell in African American theology resists the singularity of normative eschatological inquiry that limits its discursive scope to the eschatos; namely, those "last things" that most commonly refer to the Second Coming of Christ, the resurrection of the body, final judgment, and everlasting life. Given the palpability of the flesh-and-blood realities of black suffering, it appears that the urge to privilege a redemptive otherworldly landscape functions as a tool of appeasement meant to sedate the fury of the oppressed with the certain promise of a heavenly here after for the meek and mild, and eternal damnation for the hellion. While it is the case that many black churches have been corrupted by the "white lie" that suggests that the Christian reality of an otherworld recompenses the oppressed for their present sufferings, the varieties of African American theological reflection on heaven and hell categorically rejected this compensatory contention."

What Dr. Eboni Marshall Turman is getting at here is that to disembodify the eschaton, to disembodify heaven from the present moment, right here and now, has terrible repercussions for the oppressed, because it removes the responsibility of bringing heaven to earth off of our shoulders completely. We disembodify the responsibility of loving neighbor and doing justice. We disembodify that responsibility as individuals, but also as the church (the *BODY* of Christ). But friends, Christ *EMBODIED* the suffering of the world as he also embodied the resurrection/redemption of the world.

This now brings us to our next theological concept, a theology of the cross. Let's look at the full quote from Dr. James Cone's, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, that was referenced in today's sermon. This quote will tie what we have already discussed back to the cross of Jesus the Christ.

And so the transcendent and the immanent, heaven and earth, must be held together in critical, dialectical tension, each one correcting the limits of the other. The gospel is in the world, but it is not of the world; that is, it can be seen in the black freedom movement, but it is much more than what we see in our struggles for justice. God's word is paradoxical, or, as the old untutored black preacher used to say, "inscrutable a mystery that one can neither control nor fully understand. It is here and not here, revealed and hidden the same hidden at same time, "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel Savior" (Isa 45:15).

Nowhere is that paradox, that "inscrutability," more evident than in the cross. A symbol of death and defeat, God turned it into a sign of liberation and new life. The cross is the most empowering symbol of God's loving solidarity with the least of these" the unwanted in society who suffer daily from great injustices. Christians must face the cross as the terrible tragedy it was and discover in it, through faith and repentance, the liberating joy of eternal salvation.

But we cannot find liberating joy in the cross by spiritualizing it, by taking away its message of justice in the midst of powerlessness, suffering, and death. The cross, as a locus of divine revelation, is not good news for the powerful, for those who are comfortable with the way things are, or for anyone whose understanding of religion is aligned with power.

Let the church hear, we cannot fathom the depths of our salvation, our freedom, our heaven on earth, if we do not fathom the depths of the suffering on the cross. Many of us want church and religion to be “nice.” We want our faith to be “easy.” We want Easter Sunday morning, but we, like most of the disciples, run away on Good Friday. We cannot get to Easter without Good Friday. We cannot *embody* the resurrection, if we do not embody the terror of the cross. We can’t just spiritualize these ideas, we must embody them.

If we indeed are the *body* of Christ...if the church is truly the Body of Christ, then perhaps we have something to learn about really embodying that message, from the cross of those who are crucified, to their promised resurrection! This is the Good News! Christ has Risen! Go make heaven a place on earth.

Closing

Prayer

God of resurrection, we thank you for sending your Son to save us; that we may share in his resurrection, as we have shared in his suffering. “Made like him, like him we rise. Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.” Where there is suffering, Lord, send your redemptive Spirit, the same Spirit you sent to empower your church, this body of Christ, and our work. Help us to love neighbor and to love you. Heal us Lord, so that we may heal others. Inspire us and move your grace through us so that we may help bring your vision of Heaven on Earth, here. By your will not ours, by your grace alone. **Amen.**

Study Link

<https://manchestermc.org/all-church-study/>

“Eternal life is given by God, and lived out in community in acts of mercy and justice. Without relationship, there can be no love. Without love there is no heaven.”