

I'm So Glad, Jesus Lifted Me  
John 3:17  
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When I was preparing for my ordination exam, I sent out a message on Facebook to my clergy friends and asked them to send me practice questions. I asked for the hardest ones they had been asked at their own ordination exams. One friend wrote back, “When you get to heaven, will Gandhi be there?” So, I practiced my answer to that question. A couple of days later, my friend sent a follow-up: “What about Hitler?” Oof! That one was harder. Two more days went by: “What about someone who molests a child? What if it's your own child?” Wow!

Do you have answers for these questions? Will a good person—a loving, self-sacrificing person—who is not a Christian be welcome in heaven? What about a person who calls himself a Christian, maybe even someone who answered an altar call and invited Jesus into his heart, someone who has been baptized, but then goes out into the world and commits unspeakable evil. Is that person welcome in God's embrace? What do you think?

These are hard questions, and I am glad to say that no one asked them at my ordination exam. But preparing for them sent me into deep self-examination (which is one of the purposes of an ordination exam, by the way). When you come to the point of being ordained, you have to know what you really believe, and you have to be willing to proclaim that, even at the cost of not being ordained, if the examiners disagree. For an ordination exam, you are not trying to find the “right” answer, but the answer that God calls you to give.

So, my answer is that I find my path to God through Jesus, because in his life and death and resurrection, I see the face, the love, the joy of God's own self. That is my path, and I am so grateful for it. But others may have other paths, and who am I to limit God to reaching out to God's children in just one way? After all, Jesus himself said that he had other sheep who are not of this fold. So, it is easy for me to say that I certainly hope that when I get to heaven, I see Gandhi there. I would love to meet him.

The question about Hitler is much harder for me, of course. Hitler was baptized and confirmed in the Catholic faith. As an adult, he declared himself to be, “not a Catholic, but a German Christian.” German Christians were a protestant denomination that supported Nazi rule. Already I am getting a little queasy here. Hitler considered himself a Christian, and there are many, many people around the world who view the Holocaust as an act of Christians against Jews. That is, genocide was an act perpetrated in our name. When I get to heaven, will I see Hitler there?

The hardest question of all for me, is what about someone who hurts a child, even one of my own children. My mother hen instinct rises up at the thought and is ready to consign that person to the fires of hell till the end of time and beyond. You don't come after my children.

Then I remember today's scripture, which is one of my favorites. John 3:17 – “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the whole world might be saved through him.” The whole world. The Greek word here is *kosmos*, meaning universe, all of Creation, of which we are only a tiny

part. It is God's will, this text says, that all Creation be redeemed. All of it, and all of us. And if that is God's will, what can possibly stand in the way?

Surely, my own unwillingness for another person to be redeemed, THAT cannot keep God from accomplishing God's purpose. My queasiness at imagining Hitler in heaven is not even a tiny hindrance to God's overwhelming love and grace. My protective anger at someone who would harm a child cannot stop God from loving the person who would do that as much as God loves the child who is harmed. I imagine that God knows what was done to that person when they were young, and God weeps for their brokenness. Who am I to stop that love?

It is so easy for us to look at the sins of others, even the great and obvious evils that others commit, and feel above them. But 1 John reminds us, "If we say WE have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." We ourselves are sinners and can never merit God's lovingkindness toward us. So, we should receive God's love and forgiveness and reconciliation with joy and with gratitude, and not worry about how God manages to redeem those whom WE cannot forgive.

Our inability to imagine meeting someone we despise in heaven says more about us than it does about God. There is no one who is beyond the transforming love and grace of God, even if that transformation occurs beyond the grave. Perhaps Hitler will be in heaven, but we won't recognize him, because he will have seen reflected in God's face the person he was born to be and then the person he became; and then he will be transformed at last.

So, let us glory in God's love and care and redeeming grace in our own lives and freely offer that same love to all, trusting in God to reconcile at last with ALL of us and eventually with the whole of God's wonderful Creation, of which we are just a tiny part.

Sing with me:

*I'm so glad, Jesus lifted me. I'm so glad, Jesus lifted me. I'm so glad, Jesus lifted me. Singing glory hallelujah, Jesus lifted me!*

Amen