

This morning, I'd like to talk about what we know for sure. There are things we think we know, though it turns out we don't know them for sure. I married a couple once, and the woman thought for sure the man would be nice, but he turned out to be a jerk. Marriage is a risk, and we never quite know what people will be like in a relationship until the new wears off.

We went down to the farm the last week of July for vacation. Joan was sure I would spend an afternoon weeding the flowerbeds. She had asked me if I would, and I had said I would, but it turns out when we got down there, I wasn't in the mood to weed the flowerbeds. Something she thought she knew for sure, turned out not to be true.

Instead of weeding the flowerbed, I went on a motorcycle ride to visit a relative. Ten years ago his mother died and while we were visiting, he mentioned that she was in heaven. Personally, I had my doubts. Not for any moral or theological reasons. His mother was a nice enough lady who belonged to the Baptist church. If anyone should know about such things, it would be a Baptist, would it not? But I had my doubts because he was speaking about something we can't know for sure, and that is what happens to us after we die. We, of course, have our preferences, our beliefs, our hopes, about an after-life, but we can't know for sure.

That is, we can't be sure about the after-life in the same way we're sure about gravity or the sun rising tomorrow or Donald Trump offending an entire nation of people. Yet, when we talk about what happens to us after we die, we, and by "we" I mean the Church, speak with great certainty, as if we know for sure that there's an after-life and what it's like.

I received an e-mail just this week from a woman who had read something I had written, didn't like it, so wrote to tell me Jesus was coming soon and that I was in trouble. How does she know that? The early Quakers believed Jesus would return within their lifetime, and they turned out to be wrong. Just as the Apostle Paul was mistaken when he wrote the first letter to the church in Thessalonica, saying, "...the dead in Christ will arise first, then we the living, those remaining, will be caught up together with them... (1 Thess. 4:16-17). Paul believed this would happen in his lifetime, and he was wrong.

We've been talking about the stages of life. Today is the last sermon in this series. Last week we spoke our deaths, about how so many people, as they die, realize they had not lived, had not known joy and love and passion, had settled for so little when life offered so much. But it didn't seem fitting to end with a reflection on death, since much of the church's attention these past 2,000 years has been focused on what happens to us after we die.

Most of the time the church has spoken about the after-life, we've spoken about it as if the after-life were a scientific certainty. We've assumed the existence of heaven, where the people we love go, and the existence of hell, where the people we don't love go. We've made something we can't know for certain the centerpiece of our religion, demanding those who join us believe something we have no proof exists. I was speaking with a fellow pastor this past week and he said to join their church you had to stand and say that you accepted Jesus as your Savior and were going to heaven when you died. Now, I have no problem at all making an affirmation about Jesus. *To be Christian is to engage the life and witness of Jesus, and let that life and witness inform and shape your life.* But can we, with any degree of integrity and certainty, promise those who do that an after-life in heaven, and those who don't do that, an after-life in hell? Can we promise that? I don't think so.

We've been too certain about things we cannot know for sure. We can hope. I hope there's a heaven, a place of eternal joy and healing. Not for my sake. Don't get me wrong, I'll take heaven if God offers it to me. "Why, yes, God, thank you, I think I will." But I want heaven for people whose lives have been hellish, people who've never known parental love, people who've never been cherished, children whose bellies are swollen from hunger, people plagued by mental illness, teenagers who see no way out of their present misery but to take their lives. Yes, for them I hope for heaven. But if heaven is only a reward for believing the right things about Jesus, then I'm not interested.

As for hell, I have no desire to see certain people punished for eternity. Nor will I worship a God whose sense of justice would require such tyranny. There isn't one person in this room who would wish an eternity of unrelenting pain, grief, and torture on another being. Not one person so sadistic and unloving they would wish the horror of hell on another. And if we would not demand it, why would God? Man's invention of hell, and it was a human invention, God had no hand in it, man's invention of hell was and is an insult to the integrity and decency of God.

The church has been the source of much good in our world—schools, hospitals, the search for wisdom, the quest for justice and equality, the source of meaningful, supportive friendships for hundreds of millions of people. Not to mention, Joan reminded me this morning, the pitch-in dinner, which is no small thing. But the Church has also caused us to obsess so much about an after-life we can't be sure exists, that we failed to relish this present life we know exists.

Yes, engage the life and witness of Jesus.

Yes, let that life and witness form and shape your life.

Not for the hope of an after-life.

But for the good of this present life, which is such a gift how could any of us feel cheated if this was all there were.