

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 2/24/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

Throughout its history, the Christian church has made Christianity a lot harder than it needs to be. Often, this has been done for all the wrong reasons. Though not formally said this way, I think it the Christian church thinks it has a responsibility to “protect” GOD from those who are not the right kind of people. For example, the Roman Catholic Church believed that GOD would not want to be in the company of sinful people, so sinful people have to work off their sins so that they are pure. The way this is done is through worship, confession and absolution, and works of contrition, in a sense making payment for sins committed in order to attain righteousness. (Now, I want to note that a theological difference between the Roman Catholic and the Lutheran churches is that Roman Catholics believe that JESUS death on the cross only removes original sin—the sin committed by Adam and Eve through eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which is passed down from parents to children at conception. Lutherans believe that JESUS death atones for all sin so that we are free to live in relationship with GOD without having “earn” GOD’S love and forgiveness.) But, for the Roman Catholics and atoning for their sins, what about the sins that were done by the person without realizing that anything wrong had been done? And what about the sins that the person chose to leave unconfessed and unpaid for? These unacknowledged sins have to be worked off, so to speak, before the individual can enter into GOD’S presence, so the Roman Catholic Church developed the doctrine of purgatory. Purgatory is a place of suffering where an individual must stay until those unconfessed sins are paid for. But there is no mention of purgatory in the Bible.

So, why does the doctrine of purgatory exist? It is to keep people out of heaven until they are deserving or, as I said before, to protect GOD from having to be around unworthy people. And that idea is followed in many denominations and churches, though not necessarily with time in purgatory as the way of finally getting in. In fact, many church bodies hold that there are just some people that will spend eternity apart from GOD because of behaviors that are simply unforgiveable. Unforgiveable by GOD. Who came as JESUS to die to forgive the sins of those who believe. Hmm.

And as far as protecting GOD from the undeserving, well, let’s think that for a moment about those with whom JESUS spent time. There were HIS disciples and followers. And those HE healed of disease or from whom HE cast out demons, which means they weren’t worthy until after HE spent time with them and healed them. And then there were THEM! You know who THEM are. The sinners and the tax collectors. In this case, the sinners were prostitutes. You know, those women who mostly had no husbands, usually because they had died, and needed money for food and couldn’t get enough or didn’t want to get it by begging, and didn’t want die of starvation, so... And the tax collectors were those who spent time with and worked for GENTILES! You know, non-Jews. They kept associating with the unclean, and by association, made themselves unclean. These are people with whom JESUS spent time and ate meals. But wouldn’t that have made JESUS, well, unclean? But JESUS is GOD and GOD can’t be unclean or even be around people who are. Right? Except that GOD as JESUS did spend time with them and welcomed them and blessed them and...forgave them. Not because of anything they did. Not because they had earned it. Simply because they were GOD’S beloved children and because many of them believe in GOD. And that was it. That was all that mattered. It's too bad that the Church has found the need to make Christianity harder than it should be.

In CHRIST'S love,

Pastor Jeffrey