

Luke 12:35-43
Matthew 7:13-28

UNIVERSAL SALVATION

Have you ever feared the fires of Hell? Are there people you know who you think might live a better life if *they* feared the fires of Hell?

A while back, there was an article in the paper reporting that the largest Protestant denomination in the country had estimated that 46.1% of the people in Alabama were at risk of going to Hell. What is your reaction? Are you surprised, thinking of Alabama, that the percentage isn't higher? Or maybe you think, "Who cares what they think, even if they *are* the largest Protestant denomination in the country?" On the other hand, what if they're right? Would you care if 1.86 million people had an extremely difficult existence throughout all eternity?

This is not unusual thinking or perspective. The vast majority of Christians in our time think and believe along these lines. Some media surveys indicate that 60% of *all* Americans believe in Hell (though only 4% expect to go there). That must mean that 80% or even 90% of the *Christians* in America do too. The only thing unusual about the report this time was that the press picked it up. That particular denomination was merely giving its rallying cry to its people, calling them to effort and dedication for their Lord, preparing the troops for the call to expansion. Behind the statement was a demographic survey to determine where to plant new churches. Researchers totaled each county's population, then subtracted from it the membership of the churches. Then "researchers used a secret formula to estimate how many people from different denominations and faiths were probably going to heaven." The bit about 46.1% at risk of going to Hell was simply a fast way of summarizing what's at stake – why building these churches is important enough to justify the sacrifice of time, energy, and money.

Compared to more pressing news, who cares what Christians think in Alabama? Yet the item stuck in my craw. After the initial reactions swept past and I forgot all about it, it kept sneaking back to tug at the corners of my mind. Coming in from there, behind the defenses, it makes me very sad. The sadness comes on two levels, and I'm not even sure which one is more difficult.

On the one hand, I am immensely sad that I do not belong to a denomination which has this kind of fervor and dedication for building new churches and spreading its message. *Our* denomination is even now entering a huge MAKE A DIFFERENCE Campaign, and a lot of its purpose is to gather economic strength for starting new churches. But the message is so muted and convoluted and diluted by all the other messages it has to carry with it, that it's hard to believe it will turn into much of a rallying cry for our people. Why do we want to build new churches anyway? Other denominations are trying to keep people out of Hell and get them into Heaven. If the truth is right, the purpose is enormously important.

Why would *we* want to build new churches? So we can rent them out for day-care centers? So we can gather to discuss the latest psychological fad, or debate the hottest new political issue? So we can keep many denominations alive because otherwise we wouldn't have an ecumenical service at Thanksgiving? It is clear that all things have a certain importance, but only a few things call forth commitment, sacrifice, devotion, and love. I wish I belonged to a denomination that really believed in Jesus Christ enough to put all other wonderful causes and purposes in second place, in order to call people into the love and service of this Christ. And yes, I suppose some of the sadness is that I am, in a way, one of the leaders in *this* denomination, and somehow I should have found a way to help us be more fervent for Christ's Kingdom.

On the other hand, it makes me very sad that such a huge proportion of Christendom in our time, worldwide, is fixated on literal images of Hell. Hell is *not* what motivated the early church. Various images of Hell are sometimes used to challenge perspective – to get us to examine our value system. Like the story of Dives (the rich man) and Lazarus (the poor man) (Luke 16:19-31) – so akin to Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* – but if it leaves you fearing Hell, you missed the whole point. The point of the parable is that Dives was missing the point too – missing life, missing love, missing the Kingdom. He was so hung up on his self-centered life that he couldn't "see" Lazarus, couldn't be part of the fellowship, couldn't participate in the love of the Kingdom. So some people come out of the story and only learn to fear Hell. Or they come out of the story and think the problem was wealth – that Dives should have given away all his possessions. Wrong. The story is about how he was missing LOVE – a whole dimension of life he didn't even know existed.

It makes me sad that the church in our time is fixated more and more on Hell, and missing the real message. It's like reading Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and coming away determined to stay out of the terrible fate that awaited Scrooge if he didn't turn generous. The giving has nothing to do with love, nothing to do with the coming of the Christ, nothing to do with the awakening of the true inner Being. It's only a way of buying your way out of Hell. How sad to read the *A Christmas Carol* and see only Hell, and never notice Christmas.

It makes me saddest of all because the traditional, literal Hell is such a distortion of Christ's message, and of God's love. It makes me sad that such a huge percentage of those who represent Jesus Christ in our world today have changed the Gospel of grace, forgiveness, mercy, and love ... into a Halloween Show. I think that is tragic beyond description. I think it is a thorn so poisonous that it corrupts and sickens everything the church is doing in our time, whether in agreement with or reaction against this twisted view of what the Christian message is about.

And yes, once again I find myself sad because I have managed to do so little about it. Some of you want to save the trees, and I concur. Or you want to save the atmosphere, or feed the hungry, or cure the sick, or bring peace. And all of these are wonderful purposes, and even connected, in ways more profound than we realize, with the coming of the Christ. But I think life on earth will not be worth living if we do not recapture the Gospel of God's love as revealed in Jesus Christ. Hell – as Christians are conceiving of it, believing it, and proclaiming it in our time – is the death knell of this Gospel. If we believe that Almighty God – the God of our Lord Jesus Christ – created and maintains a dominion of fire and suffering where people who do not get with God's program are tortured throughout all eternity, then we do not believe or trust this God to love us for ourselves. And we are psychologically incapable of relating to this God freely, or choosing this God in true reverence or praise or gratitude. If Hell is real and true, then staying out of it must certainly take top priority. I mean, who cares about a health care plan, if we are about to go into the fires of Hell? So what if I can't get my appendix removed in time; what's a few days of severe pain against an eternity in anguish? If Hell is real, it isn't hard to figure out the priorities. If you want me to love God – fine, just as long as it keeps me out of the fire. Is that about love? Hell means we are incapable of loving this God as he deserves to be loved: in the sheer awareness and worship of realizing what this God is truly like – worthy of all honor and trust and devotion and love. But

no God who runs a Hell is worthy of any of these things. The *fear* of Hell intrudes upon and corrupts all possibility of responding from positive motives. That means, in turn, that the power and healing and joy of the Gospel gets no chance to do its true work deep within us.

The God of Love and the God of Hell cannot coexist in the same Faith. Even second- and third-generation Christians who did end up believing in a literal Hell were not confused about who ran it. It was Satan's domain. The creeds that began to form about Jesus descending into Hell pictured this as an invasion! Hell was like a vast prison for lost souls, and Jesus stormed the place, tore all the doors from their hinges, and trooped back up to Heaven taking all the inmates with Him. And there wasn't a Devil-damned thing Satan could do to stop Him. I'm simply pointing out that the Jesus of the early church would never allow Hell to continue operating. Hell was Satan's thing, and God was closing it down. Now we have Hell existing throughout all eternity, and that requires God's power to sustain it. We even have God in charge of Hell, and throwing people into Hell if they don't please him. That means, quite literally, that with our modern fixations on Hell, we have turned God into Satan (for all practical purposes), and that is precisely the internal impact it is having on thousands upon thousands of people.

The God of Love and the God of Hell cannot coexist in the same Faith. One will eventually throw the other out of our minds and our hearts. Make up your mind: You cannot love God and fear Hell at the same time. You cannot fear Hell and serve Jesus Christ at the same time. Every deep motive within us twists violently if we change it *from* gratitude in Christ's acceptance, *to* working to keep out of the flames. The product of those two is *not* the same!

Mostly this is not a battle between one church and another, or one denomination and another, or one religious teacher and another. This is a battle that all of us wage on the inside, in one guise or another. Will we trust the Lord God to love us and care about us – and to save us – or will we not? Do we think the Creator is punishing us or about to punish us, or is eager to cast us out if we goof up enough or make enough bad choices? This is not an exam in which we can cheat. It doesn't matter what the mouth says. It doesn't matter what we think the right answer is supposed to be. Do you trust God to love you, or don't you? Do you believe God is cruel and vindictive, or don't you? *All* inner power and confidence ends up at this door, and hinges on which way it swings.

Of course, we can posit that there is no god period, and therefore no Heaven or Hell – and therefore all such thoughts and conversations are irrelevant. But in that case, *all* things are irrelevant; there is no meaning of any kind that will last long enough to matter. Interesting isn't it? If there is no God, all things are irrelevant. If there is a God, all things are relevant. If there is a Creator, all created things have significance, and there is nothing in this world so small or insignificant that God is not interested in it, or why would God have bothered to make it in the first place?

Well, there doesn't seem to be anything I can do about the travesty of so many Christian churches and institutions mixing up the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all our old, primordial fears of being hated, doomed, and punished. But I can bug *you*, at least as long as you will put up with it.

There is no Hell in any traditional or literal meaning of that word. Hell is a figurative or symbolic term used to describe a condition of alienation from God, and from the fellowship and love of God's Kingdom and Presence. The flame and fire associated with Hell is not physical flame. Use your head: Is fire going to bother a Spirit Being? Do you imagine that the resurrected Jesus is afraid to stick His finger in a flame? Wake up!

The fire symbolizes an anguish of awareness – a sorrow for what we did wrong; a distress for what we did do, or failed to do, that was not in accord with God's purposes. Such "fire" assumes we have a good conscience – a longing to be with God – otherwise it would have no effect. The purpose of fire is purification. There is never any punishment in God's realms whose purpose is not correction and restoration. Sometimes there is in human realms – a correction so twisted that it no longer seeks restoration or redemption.

In case I lost you, or triggered old habits of thinking: There is no Hell as a place of burning. There is a condition of remorse, anguish, depression, shame – brought on by alienation or separation from God, or from God's will for us. Often the anguish (the flame) leads us to repentance, and back into fellowship. The flame, remember, is also symbol of the Holy Spirit. "*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire.*" (Luke 3:16) In the realm of symbol meaning, fire is not our enemy, even though it scares us and hurts us. Fire is light, truth, purity, and Holy Spirit, and we want to burn with the flame of truth and love.

Notions of Hell inevitably invite comparisons to the smelting process: the burning away of the dross – the stuff that doesn't really matter, that is holding us back and crippling us. Hell is hard and tough, but wonderful – unless we lose all sight of its purpose. In most Christian descriptions, it is as if Hell exists with a self-contained purpose of its own – to punish and never redeem – as if God would create and maintain some corner of the realm that does not *serve* the realm, and that is entirely inconsistent with God's own nature.

But I realize that if I try to redefine Hell – to explain it as it should be explained – some of you will still come out confused about what is being said. Better to say clearly that there is no Hell: There is no Hell, as our society speaks of it and thinks of it. You are not going to wake up someday, after you die, and feel the flames of some fire on your resuscitated body that God has dug out of the grave just so he could get even with you for not thinking right or living like you should have ... not even if you didn't tithed.

But there is a *real* Hell, and it doesn't begin in the next realm. Its flames are the anguish of our awareness when we hurt somebody, or betray our own souls by what we seek or by what we turn away from. The only purpose of those flames – those searing thoughts – is to lead us to repentance: to turn us back to our true selves, and our true selves back to God.

This means that when you wake up in the next realm – with heightened awareness – and see your life for what it is and what it has been – with greater clarity than was even possible here – some of that awareness is going to be painful. Searing thoughts – the flames of Hell. And the moment you feel those flames of Hell, you will know that you are going to be okay. You made it! You aren't finished, but you made it. There is enough of you left to purify. You cared enough to feel the anguish of what you want to be like, and that's all God needs to work with (the caring, not the anguish). We are also going to find out that God has more compassion and understanding for what we are going through here than we have any notion about. If you really want to believe that, you have to start trusting the ONE who came here, and preached it, and lived it, and died for it – and was raised.

Sometimes I'm asked if I believe in "universal salvation" – where everybody makes it. I think God doesn't give up on any of us very easily. It is the purpose of Jesus the Christ to save, and I think Jesus is good

at what He does. I suspect the whole story is not limited to this one experience we think of as life on earth. And I don't think you have to "believe" in Jesus; I think we have to get married to the Holy Spirit (proposal, acceptance, infusion) to survive, because that Spirit is LIFE.

Not that it matters, but since you asked: I do *not* believe in universal salvation. "*Behold I set before you the way of life, and the way of death. Choose life, that you may live.*" (Deuteronomy 30:19; Jeremiah 21:8) The drama is not between Heaven and Hell; the real Hell is on God's side, trying to draw us back to LIFE. We will experience both Heaven and Hell in the next realm, just like we do in this one, only heightened. The *real* drama is between LIFE and death. Not death as in Hell, but death as in "cease to continue": *ex nihilo*, annihilation, nothing left.

When I put it together (all the teachings about the sheep and the goats; Dives and Lazarus; being cast into outer darkness; the gnashing of teeth; Gehenna the garbage dump outside Jerusalem; all the rest), what it always comes down to – the common denominator, the real subject behind the story – is that it is always about caring: caring enough to show it, no matter what happens, no matter what comes from it.

So I have my own scenario of the Last Judgment. I don't know when it takes place, or where – maybe after many experiences in many different realms. But whenever it's appropriate – whenever God knows there can be no chance of a mistake or an oversight or any lack of opportunity – then God calls us in and says, "Who do you care about, and what do you do to show it?"

There is no faking, of course – not in that court. And I suspect that God then calls in those we claim to care about and asks them if they felt it, and if it called forth true caring in them. And they can't fake it either. Sentiment and duty and obligation won't be worth anything then, just like they are never really worth anything now. Only love is the "coin of the realm." "Who do you care about?" And all modern psychological schools notwithstanding, I suspect if we answer that question with "me" – "I love and take care of myself" – that answer will register as zero. It is Christ's prerogative to love us; that's supposed to produce in us love for others – for somebody, somewhere; for some real person, personally. "Who do you care about?"

If or when the caring drops below a certain level, it is not sufficient to hold us in LIFE, because true LIFE is made of caring. If our true answer is, “Well, Lord, I really don’t care very much about anybody,” then the result is *ex nihilo*. No punishment. No vengeance; that’s ludicrous. We just cease to be. Truly, to not care is to not exist. We have already tasted moments like that, have we not? We can get out of Life any time we want: just stop caring, and hold that stance. Just like not breathing, pretty soon you’ll blank out. No, I do not believe in universal salvation. “*Straight is the way, and narrow the gate.*” (Matthew 7:14) Many of us have no wedding garment. Some of us are too proud or too ethical to make friends with unrighteous mammon. And lots and lots of us are so busy with survival that our spirits are drugged, or half asleep. Nevertheless, if we do not care about some person somewhere, life is not worth living.

It doesn’t really matter what the excuses are. It also doesn’t matter what the circumstances are. Every conscious person – at all times, in every circumstance – can move toward or away from caring. It is one of the ways we are not children of the earth, enslaved to its necessities. “I care, therefore I am.” (Robert McAfee Brown)

So why Jesus? Can’t we just care without Jesus? I think so, for a while at least. But it’s harder than we think at first. The world talks us out of caring, beats us out of caring, betrays us out of caring, reasons us out of caring. It isn’t as easy as it looks, especially not for the long haul. A lot of us have discovered, over many centuries now, that apart from Jesus, we cannot sustain it – that the longer life goes on, the more we need a power beyond ourselves to tap both the inner capacity we have for love, and also its source. For we discover, after a while, that we are not the source – we are not the source of LOVE.

I’m sure you didn’t miss it, but to review that Last Judgment scene: Do you remember the question? It didn’t have anything to do with outer accomplishments. It didn’t care what causes you worked for, what organizations you joined, how influential your name was, what movements you designed or marched in, what companies you worked for, or how well or poorly you lived or played or watched. All of those might have been connected with personal caring – or not. There was also no form for writing in all our excuses. There was just one simple question: “Who do you care about, and how do you show it?” That is the difference between LIFE and death.