

“Who needs hell?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
March 19, 2017

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Today is a beautiful and happy occasion: we are celebrating a baptism! And our sermon topic is... let me just look here... ooh... hell. Looks like someone planned his sermon topic too early. Now all I can picture is the baptism scene in *The Godfather*, as Michael renounces Satan while simultaneously whacking all the enemies of the family. Which is a really cool scene, but probably not the mood Jill and Tim want to set today.

I admit I'm fairly uneasy with this topic myself. We don't like to talk about hell or judgment. And for good reason: the concept of hell has been used by many of our Christian peers as a bludgeon to exclude, wound, frighten, and coerce through guilt. We feel called to inspire a response of joy and gratitude, not fear. We preach a gospel of inclusive grace and love.

We recoil at the brutish idea that someone will go to hell just because they happened to be born in India and raised Hindu. We find the image of literal flames eternally torturing people childish and sadistic. We know enough about social conditioning and genetics to question the extent to which any of us can be held eternally accountable for our actions. And perhaps, most profoundly, we worry that the persistence of hell is, in the final tally, a defeat for God. It means God wasn't able to save everyone—that God's grace has a limit.

Sure, there have been attempts around this problem. Perhaps God simply annihilates the wicked. They're not tortured; they just cease to exist. Or perhaps, as the early church father Origen believed, hell isn't a literal place of fire and worms; it's the pain of a spiritual and psychological separation from God. Or maybe hell is less like Dante's *Inferno* and more like C.S. Lewis's *Great Divorce*. God doesn't send people to hell; people send themselves there. They suffer because they have chosen to reject God, a choice they are free to change even after death. Heaven's doors always remain open to them.

However, I find these solutions inadequate. I don't believe in a passive God, who's just waiting around for us to make the right choice. I believe in a God who actively saves and loves us. I believe in a God who rushes into head-on traffic for us and shields our bodies with His.

As biblical scholar Dale Allison Jr. writes, “I find little use for a deity who lets me decide my fate. I don't want to be my own God. Nor do I want the Supreme Being to respect my alleged autonomy no matter what, just as I don't want the police to respect the autonomy of the despondent guy threatening to jump off the top of the high-rise. I rather desire, for myself and for everyone else, rescue. Our decisions need to be undone, not confirmed. We need to be saved despite ourselves. Even if we're allowed, in our freedom, to kindle the fires of hell and to forge its chains, isn't it God's part to break our chains and put out the fire?”

And so, I would gladly stand before you, declare that there is no hell, and be done with it.

But I can't do that. We have to talk about hell because the Bible talks about hell. Jesus talks about hell—obliquely, and not very often, to be sure, but it's still there. Because Christ believes, and we still believe, that justice matters—that a world that does not offer consequences for unrepentant cruelty, greed, sin, and oppression is an immoral universe.

Jesus talks about hell right here in Matthew 25. He says that those who fail to care for the vulnerable among us will be eternally punished.

Scholars observe that the word we translate as *eternal* doesn't mean forever; in most other places in the Bible it simply means "for a long time."

So, perhaps, Jesus is condemning his interlocutors to a temporary, not permanent, hell. Nevertheless, these are the words of a man convinced that the life of faith matters, that how we treat each other, how we love each other, matters. There have to be repercussions for evil, even the evil of simply ignoring the homeless man on the street.

In his famous book *The Sunflower*, Simon Wiesenthal recounts his experience as a Jew imprisoned in a German concentration camp during the Holocaust. A witness to brutality unimaginable, Simon clings to the belief that that the world will one day "revenge itself on these brutes," that the hell he knows now, the Nazis will know later.

One day, out on a work detail, a nurse brings him to the bedside of a dying SS soldier. He wants to confess a horrible crime and die in peace.

He wasn't born a murderer, he says. He had a happy childhood, growing up in the church, and even thought that one day he might study theology and become a priest. But life turned out differently. Instead of seminary, he joined the Hitler Youth. He didn't have anything in particular against Jews. His family had a beloved Jewish doctor. He just wanted to be proud of his country again, and that desire allowed him to be pulled into the maelstrom of nationalistic fear, racism, and violence.

And so, when he was ordered to kill 200 Jews, mostly children, women, and old people, he did it. He helped lock them in a house and set it on fire.

And now, Karl, a 21-year-old boy dying in a hospital bed, is haunted by the memory of that house, those people, that child with black hair and dark eyes. This man, who replaced God with the Fuhrer, now wants God back. He is in agony, and he expresses what Simon believes is sincere repentance. He begs forgiveness.

Simon answers with silence and walks away. Karl dies that night.

Simon agonizes over his response, but his companions in the camp assure him he did the right thing.

Karl deserves to be punished for what he did. And not just Karl, but all those who stood by and did nothing and let it happen.

A heaven that includes Karl—that forces the 6 million who died in the ovens of the Holocaust to spend eternity beside the ones who murdered them—is no heaven.

And yet, a heaven without Karl—a heaven resigned to the fact that some of its children will not return to its bosom but be forever separate from God—is no heaven either.

But let's be clear: while Simon's silence wasn't cheap forgiveness, it also wasn't eternal condemnation. In silence, Simon held Karl's hand. He swatted away the flies. He remained and listened. In silence, heaven and hell wrestled. As Matthew Fox writes, it forced Karl to be with his sin, to be in the dark, to be with his conscience and his victims, to be with God.

True grace isn't Karl appearing in heaven, with an SS badge on his shoulder and all forgiven. That would be perverse. And true grace isn't Karl spending all eternity in hell. That would be cruel, and a defeat. Grace is Karl being judged by the silence, and then, having passed through, appearing in heaven as the boy he once was, as the boy who happily trailed his mother to church and dreamed of becoming a priest, before the world broke him. Grace isn't just forgiveness; it is transformation.

It may take us through hell, but it will never leave us there.

We believe this because Christ marched into hell and carried us out on his back. Because we know Easter is coming, when Christ will break the cross and say, along with the Apostle Paul, that nothing, not even death or sin itself, will separate us from God.

Paul's argument is clear: If God would give up God's only Son to save us, what wouldn't God do to save us?

Would he heal the ear of his attacker, as Christ did on the night of his arrest? Would he offer grace, as Christ did from the cross when he cried out, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34)? Would he refuse to abandon those who had denied him, as Christ refused to abandon Peter and, instead of making good on his threat, said "Peace, Peace"?

Would God remake us and bring us home?

There's a medieval legend that says in heaven the apostles came together to celebrate again the Last Supper. They sit around the table, laughing and remembering, but there's one chair empty. Then, through the door walks Judas—the man who was their friend long before he was their betrayer. Christ stands up and kisses him and says, pointing to the chair, "We have waited for thee."

May we all have empty chairs waiting for us. **Amen.**