

HELL'S BELLS

Mark 9:38-50

Sunday, September 27, 2009

The Rev. James Campbell

I was raised on a steady diet of meat and potatoes and green vegetables; and hell fire and brimstone. Before I ever understood anything about the boundless love of God, I knew all that I would ever need to know about the anger of God. Hell was the subject of frequent sermons. I was taught about it in Sunday School. I grew up hearing phrases like: "That man is so wicked that he will split hell wide open."

This constant emphasis on hell was used largely to keep us all in lock-step with the dictates of the church. These dictates invariably had to do with personal morality. People who drank and smoked and cursed and wore revealing clothing and danced and listened to rock-n-roll were all going to hell. And the hell they were going to was a literal lake of fire, from which there would be no escape. And this hell-talk used to scare the hell out of me!

Where did these folks get their crazy ideas? They got them from the Bible, our own Holy Book. They got them from passages just like the one we read today,

in which Jesus is purported to describe hell as a place of unquenchable fire.

How very unpleasant.

I threw off the fearful chains of my childhood religion a long time ago now. I came to understand that hell-fire talk was mostly abusive and used to manipulate and control, to divide and to conquer and to judge. Gay people in particular continue to be exposed to this abuse, doled out in large portions by the church. For all these reasons and more, I have steered a very wide path around the topic of hell.

I'm not the only one who avoids talking about hell. I bet most of you do too. We avoid talking about it for all kinds of reasons. Some of us don't believe in it, seeing it as the product of more primitive minds. Others of us are happily agnostic about it, not knowing or caring if it's true. And still others of us find talking about it, true or not, a distraction away from the main message of the Gospel – that God is love. But part of love is justice. We may not like to talk about hell but hell is another way to acknowledge that there is a lack of justice in this world. Hell is about, on some level, a desire for things to be made right, for the score to be evened. It's much easier to dismiss the notion of hell or judgment when you are not the one who suffers at the hands of another.

Maybe our God is too nice for hell because our lives are not hellish. But the Bible was written by people who were intimately acquainted with injustice. They longed for a God who would set the world right; a God who would judge in equity; a God who would call our cruelty and selfishness and indifference to account. The oppressed of this world still long for such a God.

At the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel offered this prayer invoking the judgment of God: *"Those who are here remember the nightly marches [into the gas chambers] of children, and more children, and more children. Frightened, quiet. So quiet and so beautiful. If we could see just one of them our hearts would break. But did it break the hearts of the murderers? O God, O merciful God, do not have pity on those who did not have mercy on Jewish children."*

When I came across Wiesel's words this week, their raw anger and sadness shocked me. But are they really that different from the words of Jesus in today's Gospel lesson: *"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the depths of the sea."*

Even if you discount the notion of hell, you cannot discount this human longing for justice. And could it be that God distributing justice is one manifestation of love for the ones who suffer?

How is it that our fellow humans can be capable of such cruelty? Why is it that the history of our race is littered with folks just like us who made this earth a hell for their sisters and brothers? How did it happen? The answer to that question is as complicated as we are. But much of our inhumanity to one another begins very simply. We separate from people we do not understand or like. And then we put them into categories. And then we label them and judge them and finally, as a last step, we dehumanize them. And when we do that, humans are capable of all sorts of hellish behavior. And that behavior is judged by a Holy God.

It's interesting to me that the separating and labeling of people is the very behavior that introduces Jesus' talk about hell. The disciple John was complaining that there was someone else, who was not part of the original twelve disciples, who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. The disciples had a clear idea of who was in and who was out and this guy was definitely out. He didn't look like them or act like them or talk like them. He no doubt

did not have his theological ducks in a row. It is quite likely that he even misunderstood who Jesus was. But none of that mattered. What mattered, for Jesus, was that this man was doing good. This “other” went about setting people free from the demons of fear and oppression that had chained their lives. He was helping some little ones. Don’t stop him, Jesus said. Instead, encourage him, cultivate him, see the good in him. And always remember that “Whoever is not against us is actually for us.”

It seems to me that this unauthorized exorcist was a test for these followers of Jesus, and a very important one. It is the same test that is put in front of us time and time again. Would the disciples believe that God could work through the lives of those very different from themselves? Could they let go of control? Could they see his goodness? It was so very important that they did. It is so very important that we do because it is impossible to judge and mistreat and categorize others in whom we have seen the goodness of God. To see it, you have to get close. To see it, you have to take time. When you see it, it will change your life and the way you treat others.

This is what the Lord Jesus modeled for us. He was forever seeing the goodness; the potential in others and cultivating it. Jesus once commended a

Roman soldier for his faith even though that soldier was *the* symbol of an oppressive Empire. Jesus made a despised Samaritan the hero of one of his most memorable stories. Jesus welcomed a marginalized tax collector and a political extremist into the apostolic band. Jesus befriended a disreputable woman at the well. Jesus called Saul, a persecutor of the church, to become Paul, an evangelist and missionary. In all of these complicated and imperfect people, Jesus saw the image of God. And whenever he went, the walls of separation came tumbling down.

Jesus ends this ominous and strange passage with an even stranger sentence: after saying that everyone will be salted with fire, he says: "Have salt in yourself and be at peace with one another." Scholars admit that no one really knows what this salt refers to, but the talk about peace is plain enough. Even when Jesus spoke so openly and vividly about judgment; even when he said that those who mistreat the little ones would be better off drowned in the sea; even still, he still refused to let hell have the last word. In the midst of all that hell talk, Jesus spoke peace.

The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was murdered by the Nazis. For years this German pastor had lived the horror that was the Third Reich. In such a

situation most of us would hope that the judgment of God would have the final word. If anybody deserved hell, surely the Nazis did. But this great theologian, who had spent his life studying the One who spoke peace to a storm, wrote that while he believed that the threat of divine judgment is real - that God really does hold us to account for the way we treat the "little ones" - even so, he said, "judgment a word before (God's) final word."

And here is the hope for a sinner like James Campbell - that even when I refuse to cultivate goodness in others; even when I separate them and judge them and dismiss them; even when my actions are worthy of judgment, God still has one final word to speak. That final word is captured in the hymn we are about to sing. The lyricist wrote: "*You call on us to gather God's daughters and God's sons, to let your judgment heal us so that we may be one.*" And that, dear friends, most assuredly, is the good news of the Gospel: that even judgment heals us. It burns away our fears and prejudices and cruelties. It purifies us and saves us for something far, far better. Thanks be to God.