

16th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

4 September 2016

The Rev. Dr. Brian C. Wyatt, Pastor

Revelation 6:1-8; 20:11-15

Five years ago, evangelical author and pastor Rob Bell published a book titled *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. That book got a lot of attention in the church, and not all of it was positive. As an aside, if you have not heard of it or read it, I really do highly commend it to you—it is not a long read, but it is well worth your time.

Anyway, he begins his book by telling a story about an art

show at his former church. “I had been giving a series of teachings on peacemaking,” he writes, “and we had invited artists to display paintings, poems, and sculptures that reflected their understandings of what it is to be a peacemaker. One woman included in her work a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, which a number of people found quite compelling. But not everyone,” he writes. Bell goes on to say that some blessed anonymous soul, at some

point in the exhibition, attached a post-it note to the painting that read: "Reality check: Gandhi is in hell."

I was probably in 6th or 7th grade, because I know that I had recently completed Confirmation Class and had questions. Questions that mom and dad decided were most appropriately handed off to the pastor, lest they somehow corrupt my young theological development and lead me astray with a heretical answer.

My pastor, throughout my entire childhood and young adulthood, was a wonderful man I still respect. Despite being in poor health, he got up to

speaking at Dad's funeral at our request. But he was also a giant of a man, and I had not yet hit whatever meager growth spurt would get me to the full stately physique I enjoy today. Which is to say that despite his gentle persona, I was intimidated by his stature, but so overcome with curiosity that I summoned up the courage to knock on the door of his study and pose my question.

And the question that led me to Lamar's office that day had to do with Hell.

"What about it? Lamar prompted me.

And then the questions just started spilling out. Why did we say

Jesus descended into Hell, but the Methodists didn't? Where was Hell anyway, and did Jesus free everyone who was down there, or just some people? What about the people who ended up in Hell after Jesus went down there? Was Hell forever or was it kind of like purgatory where you went for a while depending on how bad you were in this life? Was it really all fire and brimstone, and exactly how bad did you have to be to end up there in the first place? And was God really like when Mom or Dad got so angry that they were like, "I'm not going to ask you again – this is your *last* chance!" and if you

screwed up one more time, that was it. God was turning the car around, so to speak, and heading toward Hell instead of Heaven?

Lamar had this way of leaning back in his chair and folding his hands underneath his chin whenever he was contemplating something, and he did that for what seemed to me like an eternity.

But that began a conversation between us that I still look back on as perhaps the first time I really started to think critically about my faith. To understand that there were questions, deep and personal questions, that didn't have easy answers. Questions on

which people of faith would disagree, but that sometimes the best or only answer to those questions was the very act of wrestling with them even when that yielded no resolution.

There are 54 references to Hell in the King James Bible, but all of those are English translations of a few different words in the Hebrew and Greek scriptures. All of the Old Testament references to Hell are translations of the Hebrew word Sheol. But Sheol bore little resemblance to our modern ideas of Hell. It simply meant “the grave,” and there no distinction in who went there. It was the

place of all the dead—both good and bad.

The notion of any kind of afterlife did not develop in the Jewish tradition until after the Babylonian captivity, the exile, when they picked up influences of Zoroastrianism. But even then there was no concept of the soul living somewhere apart from the body. The Hebrew word for “soul” is נֶפֶשׁ (nephesh), and the meaning was closer to “personality” than “soul”.

The New Testament references to Hell are predominately translations of the word Gehenna, which translates to “valley of Hinnom.” That valley

was a literal dump outside of Jerusalem that had developed a reputation as being cursed thanks to King Ahaz generations earlier who had encouraged people to worship the pagan god Molech there and to burn their firstborn children as an offering. Maybe Jesus did suggest that some people would end up in that valley for eternity, or maybe it was another of Jesus' hyperbolic quips, kind of like when he suggested that if your eye caused you to sin, you should pluck it out, and if your hand caused you to sin, chop it off.

Revelation 6, which we read from a bit this morning, uses the

Greek word Hades, the underworld place ruled by the god Hades, brother of Zeus, ruler of the skies, and Poseidon, ruler of the seas. And the description of Hades sounds sadly like too many parts of our world today where war and famine and pestilence threaten life.

The early church fathers did believe in Hell as a physical place you would go after death, but it was not permanent. It lasted only until your evil was burned away. The most prominent theologians of that period all believed that everyone would end up in heaven eventually. It wasn't until a church council in 544

CE that Hell was declared to be a place of eternal damnation and torment.

There is not, and has not been in the Christian tradition, one clear notion of Hell – if it exists, if it's permanent, if it's a place in the after-life or a state of being in this life. John Calvin believed that Jesus' descent into Hell took place on the cross when he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That at that moment, Jesus *felt* the abandonment of God, felt truly alone in his place of suffering, and that feeling of isolation was Hell.

I've personally always been fond of the understanding proffered

by existential philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, who said simply that "Hell is other people."

But ultimately, I think my own views about Hell share a lot in common with C. S. Lewis' depiction in his book *The Great Divorce*.

There's this busload of people from hell who arrive at the outskirts of heaven. They are all invited to leave behind the sins and burdens that trapped them in hell, and to enter the joys of heaven. Lewis provides such striking descriptions of the people in hell, too, that I suspect most of us would recognize ourselves somewhere in there.

He goes on to write that "Hell...begins with a grumbling mood, and yourself still distinct from it: perhaps even criticizing it...You can repent and come out of it again. But there may come a day when you can do that no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even enjoy it, but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine."

The real paradox of Hell in C. S. Lewis' depiction, and the one that I find resonates so profoundly with my own experiences, is his idea that people are free to walk out of hell anytime. There is no permanence to Hell other than that which is

self-imposed. And the only thing keeping us in Hell is our own stubbornness, our own unwillingness to leave behind our burdens, our anger, our grudges, our addictions, our pride, whatever has bound us, to leave that behind and walk freely toward God, toward love, toward community.

The First epistle of John proclaims that "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them...[but] those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.

The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

I don't know what holds true for you, but for me, Hell is most often that place I put myself when I refuse to let go of those things that weigh me down. Fear, hatred, anger, resentment, whatever it is, Hell is not the place God sends me, but the place I send myself. And the really sad part about Hell, I think, is the adage that misery loves company.

When we find ourselves in hell, we would rather bring others along with us than join them in the sacred community. Because if

God is known in loving our brothers and sisters, but we are the ones refusing to love, then we have removed ourselves from God's presence. And rather than find our way back, we try and take others along with us. Because we don't want to be the only ones sitting on the bus outside of heaven with no one to talk to.

If you have done any looking at all into the kind of popular vision of hell most people have today, you'd know it draws far more heavily from the 13th century Italian poet Dante Alighieri than from the Bible. Dante's *Inferno* colors our images of hell more than any

other literary work including the Bible. And when Dante went about populating the characters in his inferno, you probably know he has Judas Iscariot at the center, in the seventh circle of Hell. He's got Homer's flawed hero Ulysses and a few other mythological characters.

But far and away, the vast majority of the inhabitants of hell come not from scripture or mythology, but from Dante's native Italy. Dante used his own artistic power as author to play god and condemn his own enemies. He decided to send the people he didn't like into the eternal fires of damnation.

The irony I think, for Dante as for us, is that in condemning other people, we are the ones separating ourselves from the community. We are the ones pushing ourselves away from God, putting ourselves back on that bus to hell in our efforts to condemn our enemies and play god, determining who is loved and who is not.

I left Lamar's office that day with the same question I entered – was hell real? My pastor was no more helpful in figuring that out than I suspect I have been for the many questions posed to me over the years. But I do find, at least in my experience, that hell is

real, and that is has more to do with this life than the next.

But I also remember this. There was not, for anyone on C. S. Lewis' bus, there was no 'point of no return,' no condemnation, no hell, that was eternal. And in John's Revelation, all the hells that we create, all the hells that plague our world and our relationships, they *do not* have the final word. In the end, Death and Hades were the ones cast out into the lake of fire. And the final vision that John offers, the culmination of all these images in Revelation, is of all the people, all the nations at peace with one an-

other, loving one another as brother and sister, and in so doing, loving God.

Amen