

Salvation: Saved From What?

A sermon for January 13, 2013, by the Rev. Mark Worth

READINGS:

1. From Carlton Pearson, The Gospel of Inclusion, Atria Books, New York NY, 2006:

“My daddy is in hell!” Those were the words of the presiding bishop who had just denounced me as a modern-day heretic...

“How long has he been there?” I asked quietly.

“He’s been there over ten years.”

“Has he learned his lesson by now?” I asked.

“I don’t know!” replied the bishop. “I adored him. He was my hero. But he was abusive to me and my mother. He was unfaithful and irresponsible, but I loved him.”

I asked softly, “Have you forgiven him?”

“Yes, I forgave him there and then on the spot.”

“How about your Heavenly Father? Do you not think he could have forgiven your dad as well?” The bishop paused a few seconds and blurted out, “I don’t know.” I didn’t relent. “You say your dad’s been in hell weeping, wailing, gnashing his teeth for some ten years now, eh? ... Sir, if there was a way you could get your daddy out of hell, would you?”

After an unexpectedly long pause he answered again, “I don’t know.”

I queried further: “You said you loved him and forgave him. Are you telling me that even if you could, you wouldn’t get your dad out of hell?”

Even more astounding to me he retorted again, “I don’t know.”

It was at that very moment that I knew without question that the religious system I had embraced all my life ... was badly broken and was in no way representative of the God and Christ I had loved and served all my life. ... My religion was terminally ill.

2. From Mark D. Morrison-Reed, “Dragged Kicking and Screaming into Heaven,” Quest, January, 2013:

Have you ever heard of a Unitarian Universalist speak of having had a conversion experience? ... [Mine] happened in the fall of 1980, at the annual meeting of the New York State Convention of Universalists. ...

[I was] half-listening until I heard [Rev. Gordon] McKeeman say, “Universalism came to be called ‘The Gospel of God’s Success,’ ... Picturesquely spoken, the image was that of the last, unrepentant sinner being dragged screaming and kicking into heaven, unable ... to resist the power and love of the Almighty.” What a graphic, prosaic picture – a divine kidnaping. ... Suddenly, what I had learned in seminary and what I was learning from our congregation came together and I got it: This was a religion of radical and overpowering love. Universal salvation insists that no matter what we do, God so loves us that she will not, and cannot, consign even a single human individual to eternal damnation. Universal salvation – the reality that we share a common destiny – is the inescapable consequence of Universal love.

THE SERMON

A few years ago at a family gathering my nephew, Rick, who is an Assemblies of God pastor, asked me, “Is it true that your church teaches that there is no hell?” “Well,” I said, “I believe that we humans sometimes create little hells for one another right here on earth. But as far as any possible afterlife goes, I’m convinced that there is no hell.

Never one to be short-winded, I went on, “Historically the Universalists – one of the two groups that formed our present denomination – were the ‘no hell’ church. They taught that a loving God wouldn’t create a torture chamber called hell, and then create us so flawed that we had to be sent there. God is too good and too loving to send us to hell. Some Universalists taught that there might be a

temporary hell, kind of like Catholic purgatory, where some very bad people went for a *limited* amount of time. Other Universalists said there is no hell at all. And all Universalists agreed that everyone would eventually join God in heaven.”

“How do you justify that doctrine?” asked Rick.

“Humans aren’t infinite. We are finite, limited. So our sins can’t be infinite.” I said. “Imagine that I’ll live to be 100 years old, and I do 100 years worth of sinning. Should I be given an infinite punishment for just 100 years worth of sinning?”

“Before you answer that,” I added, “Consider how long eternity is. It’s *10 million years*, followed by *100 billion years*, followed by *1,000 trillion years*, followed by *a billion gazillion years* – and after that you still have all of eternity ahead of you! You know the saying, ‘The punishment should fit the crime.’ A just and fair God wouldn’t give us limitless punishment for a limited amount of sinning – it wouldn’t be justice, it would be pointless cruelty.”

Rick answered, “We don’t understand God’s justice. It’s beyond human understanding.”

“That, to me, is dodging the question,” I said. “God gave us brains so we would use them. If we say, ‘We can’t possibly understand,’ then why should we ever think about any religious or ethical questions at all?”

Earthy Parents and a Heavenly Parent ~

“I see your point. But do you have any evidence for this?” Rick asked.

His daughter was standing nearby. I said, “Is there any way you could send your own children to hell? No matter what they did, you would never want them to be tortured in hell, would you?” “Of course not,” he answered. “I love them too much.”

“Then,” I said, “if we imperfect humans wouldn’t do that to our children, why do we think our perfect Heavenly Parent would do that to us? Wouldn’t God be even more loving than we are?”

“But God would also want justice,” Rick said.

“Is it justice to cruelly torture someone for eternity?” I asked. “I just can’t believe that if there is a traditional sort of God, the God we were taught about in Sunday school, that God would want his children to be tortured. If God wants us to be tortured, then God is cruel, and is not God at all. That kind of God would be a devil. I couldn’t worship a cruel God.”

“But God doesn’t torture us, Satan does,” Rick said.

“Who do you believe created the universe?” I asked Rick.

“God created everything there is,” said Rick.

“If God created everything, and hell and Satan exist, then God created hell and Satan, right? And God created all of the rules about who goes to heaven and hell,” I said. “So God can destroy hell and Satan anytime. It’s not Satan who is all-powerful, it’s God. And it’s not Satan who decides who goes to hell and for how long. If God is all-powerful, God is responsible for everything. And if the system isn’t fair, it’s God who is responsible for the unfairness.”

“I believe,” I said, “that if God created the universe, and if ‘God is Love,’ as the Epistle of 1 John (4:8 and 4:16) says, then a loving God won’t send us to hell.”

“But that’s just one verse,” Rick said, “and it doesn’t say whether or not there’s a hell. That’s what I’ve been asking you for, proof from the Bible that there’s no hell.”

The problem with biblical “proofs” ~

“You and I are probably going to see this differently,” I said. “I love the Bible. We call it ‘the *Good Book*,’ and it is that, but it’s not ‘the *Perfect Book*.’ It’s the classic collection of Western religious thought, the foundational book of Judaism and Christianity. But God didn’t write the Bible, print it on a heavenly printing press, and then hand it to the bishops at the Council of Nicaea. It’s a human book, written by human authors, in human languages, for humans to read and ponder. It was written before we had any scientific understanding, and so it gets many scientific ideas wrong. Some

biblical books contradict other books. The Bible's acceptance of slavery is morally wrong. But it doesn't have to be perfect to be valuable."

Rick said that he believed the Bible is the "Word of God" without error, and asked where the Bible says that everyone is saved..

"Well, there's a passage in 1 Corinthians (15:22) in which the Apostle Paul writes, 'For as all die in Adam, so all are made alive in Christ.' Who are the 'all' who die from Adam's sin? Everyone. Who are the 'all' who are made alive in Christ? It has to be the same 'all,' everyone. Everyone is saved, not just some people. And Paul says the same thing in Romans."

"Where?" asked Rick. "I don't have the Bible memorized," I said, "but I can find it." (It was Romans 5:18, "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification for all.")

Rick asked me to send him a list of Bible verses. I explained again that's not the way I understand the Bible. People find what they want to find in the Bible. I don't think the Bible is a collection of "proofs." Rather, the biblical stories challenge us to think. They challenge us to seek God, what some people call "the Holy" or "my Higher Power." The stories challenge us to live in a more loving way. They challenge us to help one another, and to work for a better world.

Some Universalist "proof texts" ~

But Rick wanted "proof texts." And so I wrote him a letter with a number of texts. I mentioned a few already. Here are some others:

In 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 Paul writes, "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are all convinced that *one has died for all*; therefore all have died. *And he died for all*, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."

Colossians 1:19-20, "For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile himself to *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." Not just some things, but *all* are reconciled.

1st Timothy 2:3-6 tells us, "This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our savior, who desires *everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for *all*." In 1st Timothy 4:10 we read, "For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, *who is the Savior of all people*, especially those who believe." And Titus 2:11 tells us, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to *all*."

In John 12:47, Jesus is quoted, "*I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world but to save the world.*" Then in John 12:32 Jesus says, "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw *all* people to myself."

And let's quote Paul one more time: "I am convinced that neither height, nor depth, *nor anything else in all creation*, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." – Romans 8:38-39.

Now, can you *also* find verses that talk about hell? Sure, sometimes the Bible says one thing, and sometimes it says the opposite. Some of the biblical authors indicate that *all* people are saved. In other places, they suggest *some* people will be punished after this life. As I said, I don't think the Bible proves things. I offer these so-called "proof texts" because conservative Christians ask for them. But to me the real value of the Bible is that it roots us in certain traditions, it calls on us to live ethically and morally, it challenges us change our lives, and it inspires us to make the world a better place.

I don't know what, if anything, lies beyond this life. But in the end, I am convinced that if there is a God, then "God is Love," as 1 John says. That's one Bible verse I endorse with all my heart. And a loving God just isn't going to torture her own children. If I'm wrong, if God *is* a torturer, then I want to have nothing to do with that kind of god.

Where is Universalism going?

As a Christian denomination, the Universalists grew rapidly in the late 1700s and early 1800s, and then went into a long period of decline. In the 20th century they became more liberal, accepting modern biblical scholarship, and broadened their religious outlook to include ideas beyond Christianity – after all, if everyone is saved, you don't have to be a Christian to be good. Rabbi Hillel wasn't a Christian. Confucius, Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama – none of them were or are Christians. But they have a lot to teach us that is worthwhile.

The Universalists grew closer to the Unitarians, and in 1961 the two combined to form the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, our present denominational body.

But in recent years there has been controversy again among the Evangelical churches with a new wave of “universalist” thinking promoted by some leaders such as Rob Bell, founding pastor of a mega-church in Grandville, Michigan, and Carleton Pearson, who was a prodigy of Oral Roberts.

Pearson, a fourth-generation preacher, a bishop in the Church of God in Christ, and pastor of a mega-church in Tulsa, was found guilty of heresy by the Joint Council of African-American Pentecostal Bishops. He was denounced as the antichrist by his Evangelical “friends,” and lost his church. His children were taunted at school. But, he says, “Progressives, gays, and churches like the Unitarians, Unity, United Church of Christ, and the Episcopalians embraced us, along with Muslims, Jews, and a host of other non-Christians, including atheists and agnostics. ... We found out that sometimes the people who are most Christ-like are not members of the religion that bears His name. Thus the title of my next book, ‘God is Not a Christian.’”

Despite being rejected by Evangelical Christians, Pearson still has hope for the gospel of a loving God. He says, “We owe it to God and to ourselves to enter a covenant of love with every experience and encounter. The word *neighbor* consists of two English words that mean “near by.” Loving our neighbor means loving everyone and everything you encounter without condition. Everything you experience has love in it somewhere. Each encounter exposes part of the self you must love, because each encounter reveals more of the essence of who you really are. Life is good. Life is God. He does not reside in a church, a Bible, a doctrine, or a sermon. He resides in you and me and everyone of us. We are each a church. Christ resides in each of us, if we can find the wisdom to see Him.”

And let's let that be our Amen.