“Some Like It Hot: A Sermon About Hell”

by the Rev. Dr. Tony Larsen

The African-American theologian and former president of Union Theological Seminary, Henry Sloane Coffin, was at one time a hymnbook editor and actually taught a course in hymnology. He apparently came across a number of hymns that he thought were either bad theology or sentimental nonsense, and he once told a class of his that he had thought of editing a hymnbook that would be entitled Hymns Jesus Would Not Have Liked. (But he realized it would be too heavy to hold and too big to fit in a hymnbook rack.)

One of the hymns he mentioned went like this – I’m not exactly sure about the melody, but the words are authentic.

The bells of hell go tingalingaling
for you but not for me.
The little devils singalingaling
for you but not for me.
O death, where is thy stingalingaling,
O grave thy victory?
The bells of hell go tingalingaling
for you but not for me.

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The Hebrew Scriptures

Today’s sermon is about hell – eternal punishment – and I begin with a little biblical context. In the King James Bible there are 54 references to hell. All the ones in the Hebrew scriptures (or what Christians call the Old Testament) are translations of the Hebrew word Sheol, which did not mean hell – it meant the grave, where there was no distinction between the good and bad. It wasn’t until the Jews were in captivity, and influenced by Zoroastrian ideas of angels and hell, that they started developing an idea of an afterlife. And even then, it wasn’t an example of a soul being able to live somewhere apart from the body. (They didn’t have a concept of soul as we know it – the word sometimes translated as soul is nephesh, and it means personality or living being). Rather, they adopted the idea of a resurrection of the body. And not all of them did! In Jesus’ time, he believed in a resurrection, but the Saducees did not, and they sometimes debated the idea.

The Christian Scriptures

Jesus did refer to hell a number of times, but the word he used was Gehenna – Ge meaning valley, henna meaning Hinnom. Ge-Henna was the valley of Hinnom, which was a dump outside Jerusalem where garbage was always burning. The ground there was considered accursed because an earlier King of Israel (Ahaz) had encouraged his people to worship the pagan god Molech on the spot and to burn their first-born children there as an offering. So it was considered an awful place. But whether Jesus used the word as a metaphor for God’s judgment, or as an actual place where some people would go, we’re not sure. Whether he meant it as hyperbole, similar to “If your eye is an occasion of sin, tear it out” and “If your hand is an occasion of sin, cut it off” (as many rabbis did in his day) – we don’t know. Even when he refers to eternal fire or eternal punishment, the word eternal didn’t necessarily mean forever – it
sometimes meant for an age, or until a purpose has been accomplished. So what Jesus meant exactly, we can’t know for sure. But we do know that not all of the early Christians believed in an eternal hell.

**The Early Church Fathers**

As early as 190 C.E. Clement of Alexandria said there was a punishment for sin after death, but it only lasted a while – until your evil was burned away. Titus, the Bishop of Bostia; Gregory, Bishop of Myssa; Origen; Marcellus; Didymus; Diodorus; Theodore; and Fabius Victorinus – all of these church fathers believed everyone would go to heaven eventually. (And you will memorize those names.) Eventually, though, the belief in universal salvation was declared a heresy, in the year 544, by a church council. And so it remains for many Christians, especially in the United States.

**Belief in Hell Today**

Today 70% of Americans believe in hell. That’s compared to only 55% in 1990. So in the last 20 years, belief in eternal punishment has gone from a little ever half to a bit more than two-thirds.

Incidentally, for those of you interested in such things, Republicans are more likely to believe in hell than Democrats are; and Democrats are more likely to believe in hell than Independents are. It works out roughly to this:

- Republicans – a little over 80%
- Democrats – a little under 70%
- Independents – a little under 60%

If you compare people who’ve been to college to people who have a high-school education or less, the higher-educated are a little less likely to believe in hell, but not by much: It’s about 75% to 65%. But the big difference is between the United States and a number of European countries. While 70% of Americans say they believe in hell, only about 40% in Great Britain do, and Spain and Austria are even lower at 30%. Germany comes in at 20, Norway at 16, France at 15, Sweden 11, Denmark 10. (Yay, Denmark!)

**Ray Comfort’s “Hell’s Best Kept Secret”**

Now, a few months ago one of our members, Luan Wells, gave me a CD that she bought at the library book sale. It’s called “Hell’s Best Kept Secret,” and it’s by an evangelist named Ray Comfort. Luan was going to listen to it herself, but thought I might like to hear it first. So I put it in my car CD player and listened to it as I went about my usual business, and I found it very interesting – and even funny in parts (the guy has a great sense of humor). But the message was quite disturbing, really. Here are some of the reviews quoted on the dust jacket:

- “This is the hottest message on the planet.”
- “It will revolutionize the church.”
- “The best thing I ever heard.”
- “I began to weep as I saw the importance of this message.”
- “I listened to it 250 times.” (from various pastors and evangelists)

WOW. The glowing reviews shouldn’t have been all that surprising, I suppose, since they’re from people like the late Jerry Falwell, Franklin Graham (son of Billy Graham), and a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

I thought it might be helpful for us as UUs to consider his argument – not that it would be very convincing to us, but that it might give us some insight into a belief system that appears to
be growing in our country... and that we Universalists actually have a 240-year history of arguing against.

So, what does this evangelist, Ray Comfort, have to say? Well, he starts out by pointing out how many Christian converts ... don’t stay converted. As an itinerant evangelist in the late 70’s, he says he had access to a lot of church-growth records and he found, to his horror, that something like 80 to 90% of those people who “made a decision for Christ” no longer attended church. 80 to 90%!

I wasn’t too surprised by this, since I had read a survey done on people who accepted Christ as their savior at Billy Graham revivals. Researchers followed up on people who had come forward to give their lives to Jesus. They found that, years later, only about one out of 300 actually belonged to a church! One out of 300. So I wasn’t surprised by Ray Comfort’s statistics; I thought they might actually be on the optimistic side.

What did surprise me, though, was the reason he gives for why he thinks there are so many “backsliders.” He says the reason so many people who accept Christ ... end up falling away from the faith ... is that they’re given the wrong message when they convert. They’re told that becoming a Christian will improve their life – that Jesus will give them peace, joy, love, fulfillment. And when their life doesn’t get all that much better, they think: I guess I was told a lie.

He says what they should have been told is that they’re headed for hell because they have sinned and they deserve to go there – but that Jesus has paid the price to let them get out of what they deserve! He says they’d appreciate being saved a lot more, if they were aware of the hell they would otherwise face. He gives the example of being on an airplane. If you’re on a plane and given a parachute to put on, it makes a difference whether you’re told the parachute will improve your flight, or you’re told it’ll save your life. If you’re told it’ll improve your flight, you may put it on and wear it for a while, but eventually you’ll find it feels kind of heavy on your shoulders, and it’s hard to sit straight with the darn thing on; and maybe some of the other passengers are going to point at you and snicker, and you’re going to feel both embarrassed and uncomfortable, and finally take it off, thinking, “Well, that was a waste of time; this parachute has certainly not made my flight any better.”

Suppose, on the other hand, you’re not told that the parachute will improve your flight; suppose you’re told, rather, that the plane is going to have engine trouble at some point, and all the passengers are going to have to jump out from 25,000 feet – so the parachute will be handy to have on when that time comes. If you’re told that, he says, then you won’t mind that the parachute feels heavy on your shoulders or that makes it hard to sit up straight. You won’t mind that the other passengers are laughing at you. You won’t mind because you’ll be thinking of the crash to come, and you’ll be grateful you have that parachute on. And then he concludes: “Saints, instead of preaching that Jesus improves the flight, we should be warning the passengers they’re going to have to jump out of the plane... We didn’t come to Jesus for a happy lifestyle; we came to flee from the wrath to come.”

It’s a fascinating argument. And he’s right that believing Jesus will save you from eternal punishment will probably make you a lot more grateful than believing Jesus will just give you a more pleasant lifestyle. I mean, if you’re walking on a mountain path and you trip and almost fall down a thousand feet to your death – you will probably be more grateful for your life than if you never came close to the edge. But the problem with Ray Comfort’s argument – well there’s actually more than one problem – but one problem is that it does a disservice to God, it maligns God’s character.
The First Problem with Hell: A Disservice to God

Now, we don’t all believe in God in this church. But if we are going to believe, it won’t be in an unjust God. (I mean, if God is just, how could a just God send anyone to eternal punishment – especially for something silly like belonging to the wrong religion? Or not believing the right thing? That would not be a moral God. And it would not be justice.) Even if you take the ancient notion of justice – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and a life for a life – even if for every bad thing you do, you get an equal bad return – you could never hurt anyone enough that the payment you got back would last forever. (Could you?) You couldn’t possibly earn eternal punishment. The concept of hell destroys the very idea of justice. And it maligns the character of God.

Even me – as mean-spirited as I can sometimes be – I wouldn’t think of sending anyone to everlasting flames. (Well, maybe I’d think about it, but I’d get over it!) And God has to be at least as nice as I am. Yet those who believe in hell, affirm that God is just. More than just – they say God is loving and merciful.

Of course, one way to get around the difficulty of a loving God who sends people to hell is to say that we all deserve hell anyway. The church father St. Augustine suggested that in the 14th century. He said existence in eternal torment is actually better than not existing at all. He said creating people and making them suffer forever, is better than not creating them at all; so people in hell already get more than they deserve! And the few who get to go to heaven just happen to be very lucky.

But I say, why would a good and loving God condemn people to eternal misery for any reason? I mean, what good could that possibly accomplish? Jesus said to love your enemies and do good to those who persecute you. Would God make rules for us about love and then abrogate them himself, all the while insisting that she is a God of love? If you or I inflicted eternal punishment on someone, we would be judged as unchristian. Right? I say that a God who would condemn even one person to hell is unchristian, un-Jewish, unloving and unworthy of adoration.

Now, some people say, “But if there were no hell, what would God do with the wicked?” And I say, if God doesn’t want to bring wicked people to heaven, why not put them in a place where they can learn from their mistakes? And if God doesn’t want to do that, then just let them die – go out of existence. How hard would that be?

But some people will tell you, “God doesn’t send people to hell. The people who turn against God send themselves there.” Riiiiight. Now, I ask you: Do you know anyone who would like to spend the next billion billion billion years burning up? I mean, I don’t know what kind of friends you have, but I don’t know anyone who would willingly choose to suffer horribly forever. Someone ought to do a survey on this – ask how many Americans would prefer to burn up in hell-fire for eternity; I’d like to know. Really, let’s put the responsibility where it lies. Human beings can’t create eternal punishment. If there is a hell, it was made by God, and it is God who sends people there. So that’s the first problem with hell: it does a disservice to God.

The Second Problem with Hell: A Disservice to Humanity

The second problem is that it does a disservice to humanity. The noted Protestant preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, put it this way: “Better to believe in no God than to believe in a cruel God, a tribal God, a sectarian God. Belief in God is one of the most dangerous beliefs a person can cherish. If the God you believe in is small and mean, then the more intensely you hold your belief – the smaller and meaner you will be. People have believed in a cruel God who will send a large part of the human race to an endless hell, and by this belief all their own cruelty was confirmed. They got the idea that the torture chambers of earth were but replicas of the great
torture chamber of God.” Or, as the Rev. Hosea Ballou put it (he was the leading Universalist minister of the 19th century): “If you can believe in a God who can send people to everlasting misery, how easy it will be for you to inflict misery on others and justify it in the name of God.” And he’s right. If you ever wondered why some Christians were so cruel in their torture of heretics and witches during the Middle Ages – that’s why. They figured anything they did to a witch or heretic – breaking her bones on the rack, burning her – wouldn’t be as bad as the torment that awaited her in the next life. So torture was worth it if it might save her soul. (Or at least help keep other people from following her example.) That’s what can come of believing in a God who would torture people forever himself.

Now, it’s true that we live in a country that’s unlikely to institute a radical biblical government like that anytime soon. But there are people who are in favor of it – and want homosexuals executed, as well as pagans. Randall Terry, a radical activist against abortion, has said something similar. Referring to doctors who perform abortions he has said, “When I, or people like me, are running the country, you’d better flee, because we will find you, we will try you, and we’ll execute you.” And then he added something very interesting. He said, “You say, ‘This is extreme!’ Yeah, you’re right. But imagine God Almighty sending people to hell just because they didn’t follow His son? That’s extreme. That’s intolerance. Imagine Jesus saying that all other religions are false. Christianity claims to be the only way.”

In other words, he knows it’s extreme, but he believes God is extreme, so it’s O.K. for him to be extreme too.

Be careful of the God you worship; for what you worship you may become.

**Hell’s Effect on Heaven**

And there’s also a strange side effect that comes from believing in hell – and that’s the effect on heaven. Part of the joy of heaven suddenly becomes watching the suffering people in hell. Thomas Aquinas, probably the most influential theologian of all time, has this description of heaven in the *Summa Theologica*: “In order that the bliss of the saints may be more delightful for them, and that they may render more copious thanks to God for it, it is given to them to see perfectly the punishment of the damned.” Doesn’t that sound a little spiteful? And although Ray Comfort doesn’t put it quite as boldly as this, isn’t that what he implies? You’re to be grateful for not having to be tortured like the other sinners.

Or consider the words of one of America’s most famous preachers, Jonathan Edwards: “The damned shall be tormented in the presence of the glorified saints. Hereby the saints will be made more sensible how great their salvation is. The view of the misery of the damned will double the ardor of love and gratitude of the saints in heaven.”

Or the words to that classic Watts’ hymn sung in some Christian churches not so long ago:

What bliss will fill the ransomed souls,
when they in glory dwell,
to see the sinner as he rolls,
in quenchless flames of hell.

This is virtue? To rejoice over others’ misfortune? I don’t think so.

You know, I don’t know if there’s a heaven after we die, but I do know that if there is, I could never be truly happy there if I thought that others must eternally suffer in hell – especially if I knew they had to suffer for inane reasons, like being a Buddhist, or a Jew. How could you be happy in heaven, knowing this?
The Price You Pay in Believing in Hell

The last thing I want to say is something about the personal price some people pay for believing in hell. When I was young and I believed in hell, it didn’t bother me too much at first, because I knew I wasn’t going there. It was a place for other people to go, but not for me. (“The bells of hell go tingalingaling for you and not for me…”) It didn’t bother me so much when I thought it was for other people. But when I got a little older and started having sexual thoughts and feelings, then I knew I was in trouble. You see, they told us that to think about something sexual for more than a few seconds, was to commit a mortal sin. A mortal sin would send you to hell when you died – unless you confessed it, and I was too embarrassed to confess. For about four years, I believed I would go to hell if I died. And that’s a terrible feeling. You don’t think about it all the time, but it’s always there in the back of your mind – “I’m going to suffer in the flames of hell for billions and billions of years, forever. It’ll never ever stop.”

Now, I don’t blame the people who taught me this. They were only teaching me what they believed. I can’t condemn those who believe in hell or teach hell to others – they’re only doing what they think they have to do in order to save people from God’s wrath. But I can tell you: Believing you’re going to hell when you die – is a kind of hell itself.

Why UUs Should Care About Hell

Now, you may be thinking: “Well, O.K. Tony, so you went through hell believing in hell – but most of us who are here today don’t believe in hell, so it’s not all that important a subject for us.” But if you could see some of the people who come through my office, people who think God has condemned them because they’re gay, for example. Good people, who think they’re going to hell for being who they are.

Part of my job, As a Universalist minister, is to undo the damage that some other religions do to people. That’s why I believe in challenging people’s belief in hell. And I hope you will challenge them too. There are people out there who are hurting because of their belief. Some of them are the way I was when I was young – I just hadn’t heard the doctrine of hell questioned. I hope you will help people question it. Don’t just sit back when they mention hell … and let them assume you agree with them. Tell them why you know there isn’t one. And if they say you need a belief in hell in order to keep people from doing bad things, point out that Universalists in America haven’t believed in hell for 240 years and yet they’ve been leaders in social reform. Universalists were the first denomination in America to take an official stand against slavery (1790); they worked for prison reform, and worker’s rights and treatment instead of prison for the mentally ill. They were the first denomination to ordain women to the ministry. They did these things because they believed in a great Spirit of Love that wouldn’t give up on anyone, so they wouldn’t give up either. They didn’t need to be threatened with punishment in order to do these things.

Hosea Ballou (the 19th century Universalist preacher I quoted from earlier) said: Preachers do a great disservice when they depict sin as pleasurable and virtue as a heavy burden. They make sin so enticing that no wonder they have to threaten hell in order to keep people from doing it.

That’s why I asked Diana to sing that song “Repent” for the Offertory. It’s an amusing song, of course, but it makes a very valid point: It shows how teaching hell can take some of the natural joy out of doing good, and suggests that no one would want to do good if there weren’t some afterlife punishment attached to not doing it. What a low estimation of humanity!
A Fundamentalist Christian minister asked a UU minister: “If you don’t teach people to fear hell, won't they just do whatever they want – lie, rape, and kill?” And the UU minister said: “Is that what you really want to do – lie, rape and kill?” What does that say about your view of human beings?

Incidentally, believing in hell is no guarantee people will be good anyway. Because, the way most hellfire preachers put it, all you have to do is accept Jesus right before you die – and you can do anything else you want to before then, and it won’t hurt your chances one bit. So believing in hell is no guarantee of goodness.

I say, we don’t need to threaten hell in order to get people to be good. I say people have something higher within them that can lead them to goodness. I say, love your neighbor as yourself – not for the retirement plan, but because it’s the right thing to do now. And if there’s a heaven after this life, that’ll be gravy. And if there isn’t, you will still have lived the most fulfilling life available to you. And you will have had the kingdom of heaven within you.