

ICCH
International Catholic Community of Heidelberg
St. Michael
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Today's readings:
Jer 38:4-6, 8-10 | Heb 12:1-4 | Lk 12:49-53

Welcome Father Peter

August 21, 2016 – 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

*“Strive to enter through the narrow gate,
for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough.”*

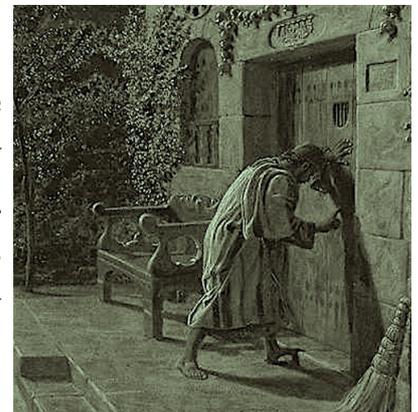
There's a question about God's goodness as old as religion itself: How can an all-good God send someone to hell for all eternity? How can God be all-merciful and all-loving if there is eternal punishment?

It's a false question. God, Jesus tells us, doesn't judge anyone. We judge ourselves. God doesn't create hell and God doesn't send anyone to hell. But that doesn't mean that hell doesn't exist and that it isn't a possibility for us. Here, in essence, is how Jesus explains this:

God sends his life into the world and we can choose that life or reject it. We judge ourselves in making that choice. If we choose life, we are ultimately choosing heaven. If we reject life, we end up living outside of life and that ultimately is hell. But we make that choice, God doesn't send us anywhere. Hell is real, but it isn't a positive punishment created by God to deal out justice or vengeance. Hell is the absence of life, of love, of forgiveness, of community, and God doesn't send anyone there. We can end up there, outside of love and community, but that's a choice we make if we, culpably, reject these as they are offered to us during our lifetime.

Hell is what we experience when we choose ourselves over community of life with others. Human life is meant to be shared life, shared existence, participation inside of a community of life that includes the Trinity itself. God is love, scripture tells us, and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them. In essence, the text might be reworded to say: “God is shared existence, and those who share life with others, already live inside of God's life.”

But the reverse is also true: When we don't share our lives, we end up outside of life. That, in essence, is hell. What is hell? The images the bible chooses for hell are arbitrary and vary greatly. The popular mind tends to picture hell as fire, eternal fire, but that is only one image, and not necessarily the dominant one, in scripture. Among other things, scripture speaks of hell as “experiencing God's wrath”, as “being outside” the wedding and the dance, as “mourning and weeping and grinding our teeth”, as missing out on the banquet, as being outside the kingdom, as living inside a bitter and warped heart, and as missing out on life. In the end, all these images point to the same thing: Hell is the pain and bitterness, the fire, we experience when we culpably put ourselves outside of the community of life. And it is always self-inflicted. It is never imposed by God. God doesn't deal death and God sends nobody to hell.



When Jesus speaks of God, he never speaks of God as dealing both life and death, but only as dealing life. Death has its origins elsewhere, as does lying, rationalization, bitterness, hardness of heart, and hell. To say that God does not create hell or send anyone there does not downplay the existence of evil and sin or the danger of eternal punishment, it only pinpoints their origins and makes clear who it is who makes the judgment and who it is who does the sentencing. God does neither; he neither creates hell nor sends anyone to it. We do both.

As Jesus tells us in John's Gospel: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ... I judge no one.” He doesn't need to.

[Ron Rolheiser OMI, *shortened from*: http://liturgy.slu.edu/21OrdCo82116/reflections_rolheiser.html]

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