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What and Where is Hell?
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God is love. God is unconditional love.

The way I have come to say this same thing is: "We are safely held in Sacred Mystery."

The teachings of Jesus are mostly about two things: forgiveness and inclusion.

You pretty much in agreement with these statements?

God is love. God is unconditional love. We are safely held in Sacred Mystery.

Got any serious disagreement with these affirmations of faith?

People who have not accepted Jesus as their personal savior, who are not Christian or who in some other way have offended the sensibilities of this God, are sent to a hell of eternal conscious torment.

That's a hell of a thought, isn't it?

Today we are going to talk about hell.

I have moved in my teaching to talk about some matters related to the Judeo-Christian understanding of resurrection. In doing so it is inevitable that we talk some about our own death and destiny - insofar as that is possible.

We have a problem:

On the one hand -

God loves all the children of the world.

Black or yellow, brown or white,
They are precious in his sight.

Unless they don't believe in God's son.

Then, and the way it is sometimes presented, God
cheerfully sends them to burn forever in hell.

As we look today at the question "what and where is
hell?" let's begin by looking at the role beliefs play
in the way we construct and/or respond to the events
and experiences of our lives.

We cause ourselves and others, some very close to us
whom we claim to love and some we've come to label as
enemies, a ton of trouble by errors in thinking.

If you have a daily practice that consists at least in
part of just sitting and trying to train yourself to
just "pay attention," you will very quickly learn that
your mind has a mind of its own. Try it. Try to pay
attention to the physical sensation of air moving into
and out of your nostrils. Maybe count to ten and then
start over.

You might be lucky and make it to two when you notice
this "your mind has a mind of its own" business. It
says things like, "Well, this is a waste of time. . . .
If I'm going to have to sit here for ten more minutes,
I might as well do something useful like make up a menu
for the week. . . ." And, on it goes.

If you get beyond that - and it takes courage,
patience, persistence - you will discover how most of
what we think is so petty.

You begin to wonder how we could ever put our trust in our own thoughts and opinions when we see how self-serving, petty, paranoid, narcissistic and needy our thoughts and opinions reveal us to be. For one thing, we spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about how right we are and how wrong everyone else is.

Paying attention is at the heart of spiritual practice. Paying attention to what you believe and why you believe it nudges you into graduate school in spiritual work. The man you've heard me refer to as my spiritual teacher said to me back in the late sixties that we cause ourselves and others untold amounts of trouble by making what he called two "epistemological errors."

The first is a failure to see that what is is, and what ain't ain't.

The second is this: I'm not happy now but I will be as soon as I can make you be different.

Now almost fifty years later, I would add another to that: Nobody is special. When any person or group thinks it is, there is trouble ahead.

This business of being special shows up in any number of guises.

One of them is, "Our way of looking at things is the only 'reasonable' way of looking at things." This quickly leads into the territory of "I've got the truth and you don't."

Another notion that is problematic is the one that says "our way is inherently superior."

Exceptionalism, religious or national, causes this world a lot of trouble. Elbert Hubbard, the American

philosopher and writer, wrote, "Christianity supplies a Hell for the people who disagree with you and a Heaven for your friends."

When it comes to looking forward much of organized religion doesn't seem to have that capacity. We can look backward and see that slavery is a bad idea. It is laughable now to think of a geocentric universe that puts "man" at the center of things. The history of the world, especially that of Christianity, is littered with what are called "religious wars" or "wars of religion" and even today some people do not see the sad irony of that.

I am personally convinced that in a matter of time - I hope it is not a long period, those who come after us will look back on the divisiveness and vitriol that is abundant in our time about the homosexual issue and think of it as we now look back on the issues of slavery, people being divorced and whether women can serve alongside of men in ministry - though that is still a touchy issue in some places. Not just in Middle Eastern religions but in the Mormon and Roman Catholic groups as well - and in the denomination that birthed me, Southern Baptists.

If a person or a group holds these beliefs they are seduced into believing "we, among all the groups under consideration, are the ones who are logical, rational and totally consistent."

Someone recently sent me a church outdoor sign that said, "We truly regret that gay marriage attacks the sanctity of your fourth marriage."

All of these myths I have mentioned subtly seduce the person or the group who hold them into believing and behaving as they believe God would behave.

Because this is the ethos of our culture any of us can be led into looking at so many things and not seeing them as they are. Remember: the central truth of and for spiritual practice is developing the willingness to see "what is." One of the most damaging things we can do to our Selves, read: our Souls, is to look at the world, at others, at ourselves and the lives we are living and divorce them from Sacred Mystery.

What got Jesus into trouble was challenging these very myths and assumptions as they were held by those in power in his day. In essence, what he said to the Roman Empire, to the emperor if you will, is "There is one God and you are not it."

What Jesus referred to as "the rule of God" is everything our culture is not. Don't get me wrong. There are many aspects of our culture that I love.

The rule of God is gracious. I just heard this week that Houston, Texas has the rudest drivers of any city in the United States.

The rule of God is fearless. Have you noticed how the so-called powerful are so paranoid?

I am, as you know I hope, doing a series of talks on my reading and reacting to Brandon Scott's book, "The Trouble with Resurrection." Church doctrines and teachings about the crucifixion of Jesus and its implications are at the heart of the Christian religion. The cross or the crucifix, there is a difference between them, are at the heart of almost every place of Christian worship.

So I'm undertaking an effort to get those of you who want to join me in a journey of rethinking some of what

we have been taught and/or assume about the crucifixion of Jesus and the various interpretations that have been put on it in the years, decades and centuries after.

These talks I'm offering in here have, at least in my mind, some logical progression.

Jesus is executed.

His execution is interpreted by his followers, especially Paul, in light of the developing Jewish theology of the time. Since most of us are not Jews and since none of us live in that time, it is very difficult for us to understand what and how these people thought.

They wrote their thoughts and experiences down in an effort to communicate them to those who were new to the Jesus movement.

Paul, for example, did not write for us but for quite small groups of newcomers to the "Jesus movement." Most were Jews. Some were not.

When I say these writings were not meant for us that doesn't mean that we are not to take them seriously. I do. I just don't take them literally. Because, and I'm using Jesus here as my model and guide when it comes to scripture interpretation, literalism is the lowest and least level of meaning.

It saddens me so much that those who now seem to have the most power, certainly they shout the loudest, have moved backward in their ability to read spiritual and transformative texts of Scripture and find in them the liberation Sacred Mystery desires for all people everywhere.

If we can follow Jesus in his use of his Scripture, we can look back on someone of a tribal culture advocating violence or some text that someone now takes as condemning someone who is left-handed - oops, I'm sorry, I meant "homosexual" - as simply having gotten it wrong. For many people saying something like that borders on heresy.

Last week we talked about what I believe about life after death, and this is something you will have to decide for yourself, and that is that we do not need to fear death. Fear of death is understandable. Fear of death is unnecessary. This is true because it is my faith that we all reside safely in Sacred Mystery.

I called that talk "The Fate of Your Eternal Soul." What about the other side of the coin. What about hell? Everybody in this room, perhaps in what we call "the civilized world," believes in hell. So, what about hell? What and where is hell? Are some folks destined for hell?

There is a difference, more often than not a HUGE difference between fate and destiny.

Fate is something you are handed at birth. Unless you believe in karma and reincarnation, we have no control over our fate. I saw a cartoon recently where a young child is sitting on a couch talking to her very much older grandfather. The child is saying, "Yes, I know. When I was your age I didn't believe in reincarnation either."

Not everything about who we are and what happens to us is predetermined but a great deal of it is. Into what tribe we are born and where on this planet we are born determines much. Our sex and the color of our skin, the affluence we experience or lack thereof, the skill and

wisdom of our early caretakers, the opportunities we have had to learn, the genes we inherit, whether we grow up in a healthy environment or not and a multitude of other things that we had no control over, these things constitute our fate.

Many people in the United States live with the rather pious myth that everybody has the same opportunity as everybody else and that simply isn't true. I watched a recent Bill Moyers program the other night that was about the role and reality of racism in this country. Long after the Emancipation Proclamation, long after the ruling to desegregate public education this program showed the statistics, particularly in the realm of public education, about how racism is alive and well in the home of the brave and the land of the free.

Occasionally you will hear a story about someone who has overcomes tremendous disadvantages to achieve lofty goals but such stories are the exception.

Destiny, on the other hand, is something else. Destiny has to do with what we do with the precious lives we have been given. I consider that we, sitting here today, are among some of the most privileged people on the planet.

A friend of mine, and his family, were lucky enough to be able to leave Iraq after the invasion where we were supposed to be welcomed as heroes and which was supposed to last a matter of weeks, - that invasion, by the way, took place on March 19, 2003; over 11 years ago - and my friend has not only lost everything but also has his family spread out now all over the world. Further, it looks like what gains this unjust and unnecessary war got us are now being lost.

At any rate, we do not live in a war-torn country. That is not our circumstance. Most of us are not worried about where our next meal is coming from or where we will sleep tonight.

We actually have the liberty to wonder about and work on the kinds of matters that get talked about in here. We actually have time to focus on matters of psychology and spiritual growth.

Occasionally I will hear someone from this demographic group complain about how life is not fair and I will quickly agree. It is not fair that we are so privileged and most of the world is not.

In the Jewish religion there was an emphasis on two things: the law and the prophets. In brief, the law taught people how to live, sometimes down to the most minor detail, while the prophets contained that self critical aspect of the faith that focused on distributive justice. All people were to be treated equitably. Especially those who for whatever reason were disadvantaged in the social fabric of things. The prophets were renown for telling the high and mighty off, for giving them hell if you will.

By the time of Jesus a belief had developed that things were so unjust that surely there would be a time when the God of the Jews would set things straight. Those who had been denied the opportunity to live their full lives on this earth would someday have those lives restored to them. Surely.

Jesus came preaching about the rule of God that not only affirmed the prophetic vision but also extended it. I'm sure you have likely heard what I call the "transformative initiatives" of Jesus where he said,

"You have heard it said (that is, what the prophets said) but I say unto you. . . .

After his death and the experience of resurrection, which means that those followers of Jesus experienced that the God of Jesus exalted Jesus as Lord and not Caesar, some were puzzled about and disappointed in the fact that the rule of God they expected didn't occur. They were still being persecuted.

For some the belief developed that Jesus would return and establish this "rule of God." When this would happen, heaven's armies would ride out of the sky and vanquish the Roman Empire. Then the perpetrators of evil and injustice would get what was coming to them. The old order would be destroyed and God would reign through his Messiah in Jerusalem. But, it didn't happen.

If you go along with what I said last week about all of us being held safely in "the heart of Sacred Mystery," you might already guess that I hold it, and I'm just agreeing with most mainline biblical scholars and theologians, that the message of Jesus has been significantly misinterpreted. It is easy to see why.

Luke's version of the Jesus story has him saying in his first sermon,

"God's Spirit is on me;
he's chosen me to preach the
Message of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of
sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

What happened to that world?

One answer to that is that it has been horribly misinterpreted. When Jesus talked about "the end of the world," what he envisioned here on earth was the same as the Jewish prophets before him: an end to a world that promotes bondage and blindness and oppression, and the dawning of sight - people having eyes that see.

The way some people who call themselves "Christian" behave and some of the "beliefs" they spout, you might gather that Jesus changed his mind. Before the crucifixion he stood in the solid tradition of the Jewish prophets - on the side of the poor and the dispossessed, opening his arms to and eating with the marginalized. Then after the crucifixion, he changed his mind and decided to hang out only with good, white Protestant Christians - particularly those who believed the "right things" and who hated gays and lesbians.

For Jesus the end of the world was not some future event. It was something that is very present in each and every moment. The rule of God is available now to anyone who will receive it. We will soon talk in here about the difference between Jesus and "the Christ." For now suffice it to say that Christ comes to us as and when we look to Jesus as a guide to shape our destiny.

We live in a world where systems clash against systems, more often than not in the name of God and/or religion. The real war that matters in this world in which we live is the one we wage within ourselves. It is the fight between the current system of values and its control over us and our complicity with it.

Here is where it comes down for me: I can't change the world. I can change the world in me. This is the key to making sense of something Teresa of Avila said, "It is

heaven all the way to heaven. It is hell all the way to hell." The good news is that no matter what fate has handed us, and I am aware of the audience to whom I am speaking, we are among those who are fortunate enough to work on our destiny until we lose consciousness.

Our spiritual and psychological work is to develop the courage and faith to look and see what we have hidden in our hearts that keeps us from living authentically, that keeps us from living with power, that keeps us from living with grace. What fears keep us cowering before the world, not daring to rock the boat or question the system?

The big sin of the church historically, and this is why the church has started and condoned wars, is that the church has fit the teachings of Jesus into its life rather than working to fit the life of the church, our lives if you will, into the teachings of Jesus. Jesus has been domesticated into someone who fits into our agenda.

The way of life and living that Jesus taught and demonstrated is very unsatisfactory for our egos. Most of us, and this is something that is very reflexive and reactive rather than proactive, prefer things that allow our ego an immediate sense of superiority and the sense that we are right, that things are settled and that we are in control. These, of course, are the very qualities that close down any necessity for ongoing spiritual work. The work I'm referring to are things like prayer and the struggle to live in and with the ambiguity of non-dual mind.

As you have likely heard me say before, one of my favorite sayings of Jesus, this is found in the Gospel of Thomas, is: "What you bring forth from within you

will save you. What you fail to bring forth from within you will destroy you."

All of which brings us to the matter of hell.

I grew up, as did many of you - and I believe most people whether they were exposed to much religion in their childhood inherited such beliefs - in a religious tradition that taught that people had souls and that unless people accepted Jesus as their personal savior when they died, they went to hell. This abusive religious notion scared the hell out of me for years and then it began to make no sense to me.

"What about people who have never heard of Jesus?" I would ask.

"That's why we must evangelize and 'save souls.'" I was told.

"I know some really good people who are Jewish. Are they going to hell?"

"Yes, unless they accept Jesus as their personal savior."

The absurdity of this crazy belief hit me in a history class one day when I was reading about the holocaust. Millions of Jews were exterminated by the Nazis. Hitler was a bad, evil man. Nazism is a bad thing. It is scary to see "neo-Nazi" movements springing up all over the world. Surely, Hitler is burning in hell. But, wait a minute. So, according to what I was taught, are the Jews he slaughtered. That doesn't make any sense.

I assure you from personal experience that a child hearing about hell for the first time and wondering if he or she will be able to avoid it, is torture. What

kind of loving parent would want to instill such an unnecessary fear into an innocent child?

The "god" most people are initially taught about is not a god to fall in love with but a god to fear. If you went out on a date with someone who said, "By the way if you don't love me and believe in my son - especially the fact that I'm killing him for you, you are going to burn in an eternal conscious hell forever," - you wouldn't go out on a second date with this person.

The notion of hell and my understanding of it shifted when my understanding of God shifted. I got to the place where the words "eternal conscious torment" could not be reconciled with "God's unconditional love."

My understanding of hell also shifted when my beliefs and experiences with Jesus shifted. Jesus went from being "fire insurance" and a "salvation ticket" to "teacher" and "way-shower."

I've heard people say that "hell is the absence of God." Really? I thought God was everywhere. Further, if there is a hell, God must be maintaining it.

By the way, when it comes to the Bible, you will find so many different ways of reading and interpreting the people who wrote those documents in their struggle to come to terms with the perpetrators of injustice. Consequently, you can find support for any position you want to embrace when it comes to hell.

In the Apostles' Creed we affirm, among other things: Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell." If Jesus descended into hell, it isn't hell any more.

Mother Teresa was once asked if she believed in hell. She said, "Yes, I believe in hell and it's empty."

Here is a question I put to you: What is the character of your God?

I believe everybody has a god or some sort.

In dealing with the matter of what and where is hell I'm contending that the question that matters is the one that seeks to get us to be clear about the character of our God. The way I understand and answer that is based on my experience with and understanding of the teaching of Jesus. You'll have to decide for yourself: Is God a God of retribution? Or, is God a God of restoration?

I'm not prone to give advice. If, however, I had advice for you on this matter of what and where is hell, I'd advise you rather than allowing what you have been taught about hell to shape your view of God, to let Jesus' teaching about God shape your view of hell.

Love never gives people no hope.

Love, being unfailing, restores.

Love never gives up.

Let me tell you a story about heaven and hell. It is one of my favorite Zen teaching stories.

Once there was a Samurai warrior and a Zen Master. The warrior was big and strong and had won many battles. He was very famous for his mastery as a Samurai. The Zen Master was a rather small old man with merry eyes, and was well-known far and wide as being one of the wisest and kindest men in the land.

One day the Samurai went to the Zen Master for instruction. "Please," the huge man asked, "teach me about heaven and hell."

The Master scowled at the swordsman, then broke into a mocking laughter. "Me, teach you about heaven and hell? I wouldn't waste a moment trying to instruct the brain of an overweight ignoramus like you! How dare you ask me for such a lofty insight?"

Upon hearing these words, the Samurai grew furious. No one could insult him like this and get away with it. Enraged, his face flushed and he drew his sword to chop off the teacher's head. Just as he was about to bring down his sword, the Master raised his hand, looked at the warrior and calmly said, "That, sir, is hell."

Upon hearing his, the Samurai suddenly realized the profound lesson the Master had just taught him - that we make our own hell by indulging in anger, judgment and resentment. The warrior was so grateful for this teaching that he dropped his sword and fell to his knees in front of the Master, bowing in humility and gratitude. When he looked up, the old man was smiling.

"And that, sir" the teacher noted, "is Heaven."

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.