Sunday Message Notes

"Let's Talk About Hell, Baby"

Philology - the study of language in historical, oral, and written sources, combining literary criticism, history, and linguistics to interpret texts and understand cultural history. It focuses on the evolution of language, textual authenticity, and the relationship between literature and society.

Matthew 25:46 And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.

kolasin aiōnion, but the righteous into life aiōnion."

κόλασις (*kolasis*) = *correction, pruning, restraint*

It comes from **κολάζω**, used for **cutting back branches** so a plant can flourish

Its aim is **remedial**, not vindictive

The English "punishment" hides the remedial nuance

Once "punishment" is assumed to be retributive, eternal hell seems obvious. But that assumption is **imported**, not textual.

Hart, David Bentley. *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

If Christianity taken as a whole is indeed an entirely coherent and credible system of belief, then the universalists understanding of its message is the only one possible (3).

D.Min Project

As a Christian Universalist I teach that all souls are, or ultimately will be, reconciled to God. My context is primarily African-American, where histories of systemic injustice span generations. Understandably, justice expectations can go unmet without an afterlife reckoning reserved for oppressors who appear to have escaped consequences in this lifetime. **Universalism can appear soft on justice.** The theological chasm created between divine redemption and divine justice can present as vast and problematic. No hell, no justice. No justice, no peace.

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Sunday Message Notes

I am investigating how historical oppression informs resistance history with universalism among Black Christian Church communities in Atlanta. Shaming an oppressed community for holding to hell theologies is spiritually bypassing real pain and emotions and is antithetical to human cries for justice. Hell offers comfort and steadies faith in a liberative just God, who might historically appear absent in oppression. Yet, an eternal hell questions both the love and efficacy of God. In my doctoral project, I will argue that a temporary, purgative afterlife for the unjust, could satisfy justice demands while also bearing witness to a God of redemption.

Introduction

Christian universalists have existed since the earliest centuries of the faith (Patristics). They even believed in hell, though not in its eternity.

We can set no limits to the agency of the Redeemer: to redeem, to rescue, to discipline in his work, and so will he continue to operate ***after this life****. All men are his . . . for either the Lord does not care for all men . . . or he does care for all. For he is savior; not of some and of others not . . . and how is He savior and Lord, if not the savior and Lord of all?* ***For all things are arranged with a view to the salvation of the universe*** *by the Lord of the universe both generally and particularly.* *~ Clement of Alexandria, 150-215*

St. Basil of Caesarea (c. 329-379) observed in his time "a large majority of his fellow Christians (in the Greek speaking Eastern Christian world) believed hell was not everlasting, and that all in the end would attain salvation" (1-2).

The Question of Eternal Hell

Framing the Question

Eternal hell can neither be avoided nor dismissed as mystery or secondary doctrine. On the contrary, hell-talk must be centralized. The coherence of the Christian faith and definitions of God's goodness, justice and love are at stake. The question at hand is not if hell exists, but rather if any creature could eternally suffer there under the consent of a God who is infinitely good and loving. The traditional image of eternal conscious torment suggests a universe where evil realizes everlasting, ultimate victory.

Doubting the Answers

The credibility of universalism rests on divine justice being proportional. Proportionality resists the hell apologetic that eternal torment is just as it corresponds to sin against an eternal,

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infinite God. Finite sins cannot merit infinite punishment. Disproportionate punishment undermines any coherent sense of divine justice. The punishment should fit the crime.

The claim people go to hell for freely choosing to reject God ignores the impossibility that a fully informed will cannot reject God. Persistent evil is intrinsically tied to ignorance and distortion, not rational freedom. In essence, when a sentient being truly, fully grasps the love of God, eternal rejection of that love is incoherent. Many Christians experience moral unease, and accept eternal hell reluctantly, feeling it's required by tradition. This moral unease is not a weakness, but a clue that something is wrong with traditional justifications.

Communal Salvation

Persons are created as relational, social beings. The communal nature of personhood and love means that saints in heaven would suffer alongside those eternally lost. Scripturally, we find this communal application with humanity communally, collectively dying in Adam and also communally, collectively being made alive in Christ (I Cor. 15).

Justice is not Resignation. Justice is Redemption

Eternal an hell is a confession that justice failed. Divine justice is one that refuses to give up until all things are made right. Eternal torture does not heal oppression, it simply multiplies suffering, forever. Wounds remain unhealed. The cosmos remains fractured. Evil is not undone, it is merely isolated. This is not justice, but simply cosmic resignation.

If God is good, the oppressed cannot be ignored, neither can the cries for liberation within the oppressor be disregarded. Retribution is punitive. Restoration is purgative. The oppression within the oppressor must also stand before the justice of God. Eternal retribution neither heals the victim nor the victimizer.

The fundamental idea of divine goodness cannot coexist with belief in a good God who would torture oppressors eternally without redemptive cause, lest the goodness be perceived as badness. Strategically, "hell" should not be removed as oppressors must be redeemed, and the oppression lurking within must be remanded, whether in this life or the next. Consideration of the early church doctrine of *apokatastasis* provides an opportunity for those in my context to perceive of a temporary reckoning in the afterlife. Theologically, this could serve to satisfy the justice of God, gratify the honor of God, and preserve the goodness of God by reimagining hell as divine temporary teaching, rather than endless torment.

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