

The last word

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A healthy fear of God

Why don't we preach hellfire any more? That's a question asked frequently today by a lot of sincere religious people who worry that too many churches, and too many priests and ministers, have gone soft on sin and are over-generous in speaking about God's mercy.

The belief here is that more people would come to church and obey the commandments, particularly the sixth, if we preached the raw truth about mortal sin, God's wrath and the danger of going to hell when we die. The truth will set you free, these folks assert, and the truth is that there is real sin, and real and eternal consequences for sin. The gate to heaven is narrow and the road to hell is wide. So why aren't we preaching more about the dangers of hellfire?

What's valid in this kind of reasoning is that preaching about mortal sin and hellfire can be effective. Threats work. I grew up subjected to this kind of preaching and readily admit that it had a real effect on my behaviour.

But that effect was ambivalent. On the positive side, it left me scared enough before God and life itself never to stray very far morally or religiously. On the negative side, it also left me religiously and emotionally crippled in some deep ways. Simply stated, it's hard to be intimate friends with a God who frightens you, and it's not good, religiously or otherwise, to be overly timid and afraid before life's great energies.

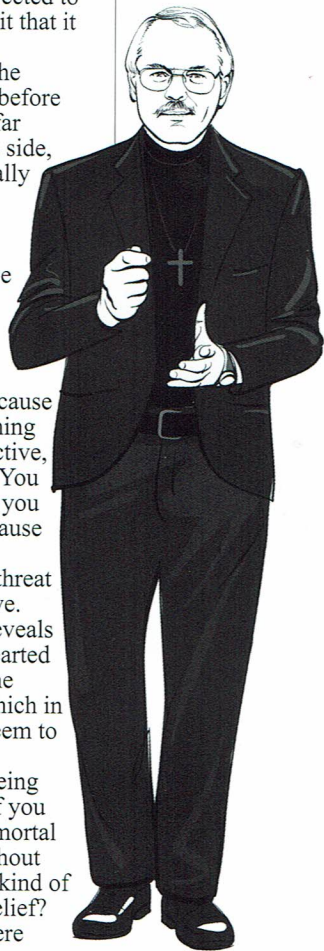
Admittedly, fear of divine punishment and hellfire can be effective as a motivator. So why not preach fear? Because it's wrong, pure and simple. Brainwashing and physical intimidation are also effective, but fear is not the proper fuel for love. You don't enter a love relationship because you feel afraid or threatened; you enter because you feel drawn there by love.

More importantly, preaching divine threat dishonours the God in whom we believe. The God whom Jesus incarnates and reveals is not a God who puts sincere, good-hearted people into hell against their will, on the basis of some human or moral lapse which in our moral or religious categories we deem to be a mortal sin.

For example, I still hear this threat being preached sometimes in our churches: if you miss going to church on Sunday it's a mortal sin, and should you do that and die without confessing it you will go to hell. What kind of God would underwrite this kind of a belief? What kind of God would not give sincere



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people a second chance, a third one, and 77 times seven more chances if they remained sincere? What kind of God would say to a person in hell: "Sorry, but you knew the rules. You're repentant now, but it's too late. You had your chance"?

A healthy theology of God demands that we stop teaching that hell can be a nasty surprise waiting for an essentially good person. The God we believe in as Christians is one of infinite understanding, infinite compassion and infinite forgiveness. God's love surpasses our own and if we, in our better moments, can see the goodness of a human heart despite its lapses and weaknesses, how much more will God do this? We've nothing to fear from God.

Or have we? Doesn't Scripture tell us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom? How does that square with not being afraid of God?

There are different kinds of fear, some healthy and others not. When Scripture tells us that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, the kind of fear it is talking about is not contingent upon feeling threatened or anxious about being punished. That's the kind of fear we feel before tyrants and bullies.

There is, however, a healthy fear that's innate within the dynamics of love itself. This kind of fear is essentially proper reverence, that is, when we genuinely love someone we will fear being selfish, boorish and disrespectful in that relationship. We will fear violating the sacred space within which intimacy occurs. Metaphorically, we will sense that we're standing on holy ground and that we'd best have our shoes off before that sacred fire.

Scripture also tells us that when God appears in our lives generally the first words we will hear are: "Don't be afraid!" That's because God is not a judgmental tyrant but a loving, creative, joy-filled energy and Person. As Léon Bloy reminds us, joy is the most infallible indication of God's presence.

The psychiatrist Fritz Perls was once asked by a young fundamentalist: "Have you been saved?"

His answer: "Saved? Hell no! I'm still trying to figure out how to be spent."

We honour God not by living in fear lest we offend him, but in spending the wonderful energy that God gives us to help life flourish. God is not a law to be obeyed, but a joyous energy within which to generatively spend ourselves.

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