

From the Pastor's Desk

Religion and Fear

Shortly after getting my drivers license in high school, I went on my first date. I remember feeling awkward as I asked Margie if she would like to go to the movies with me. To my delight, she said yes and it was all set for Friday evening. I picked her up at 6:30 pm so we could cruise main street for awhile before the 7:00 movie. I don't remember what the movie was about but I do remember enjoying being with Margie and the ability to drive us around in my parent's car. After the movies we went over to her apartment. Her parents lived on a ranch about 40 miles from town so they rented their two daughters an apartment in town during the school year. As luck would have it, her older sister was back at the ranch which left Margie and me alone. We sat on the couch and talked for a long, long time and before I left I got my first kiss. What a thrill!

When I started the car, I couldn't believe the time. It was 12:30 AM. Yikes! "I hope mom and dad are in bed", I thought, "or I could be in trouble." When I arrived home, the house was dark except for a light in the kitchen. I opened the back door and tip-toed through the entry and into the kitchen. There sat mom and she was not a happy camper. She knew I was on my first date and expected the worst. "Where have you been?", she asked. "The movie was over three hours ago." Then I got my first "birds and the bees" talk. Well, actually my first was from my friend Kevin in the sixth grade when I remember laughing until my stomach hurt. Mom's was more serious, short and to the point. I got the message pretty clearly: "Don't have sex!" Then, to rap things up, she threw in something about being careful that I don't go to hell. I found it a little odd that she would bring hell into it, but I realized what she was really saying which was: **"DON'T HAVE SEX!!!"** She hoped the fear of hell would override my adolescent hormones, but had nothing to worry about that night with Margie. My plate was full simply getting my first kiss. I understood mom's concern and would have had the same if I were in her shoes. But, her "birds and the bees" talk and reference to hell weren't very persuasive.

Sex and hell. It is unfortunate that these two are so often united. Sometimes churches and pastors are blamed for propagating a negative outlook upon sexuality and an understanding of God whose main job seems to be to point fingers of condemnation at people and keep lists of wrongdoing. But, I wonder if parents are not also responsible for this image of God. God has often been used by parents as the Great Enforcer of what they most fear. In my case, mom feared I would have premarital sex and get my girlfriend pregnant. It would have been more helpful if we could have talked about the gift of human sexuality and how it can be dealt with responsibly. Instead, what I heard her talking about were her fears. Given our Catholic background, it was nearly impossible for her to talk about birth control, which is essential to any responsible discussion about human sexuality, especially now with the risk of AIDS and other sexually transmitted deceases. So, the church was not helpful in our conversation.

Fear has its place. When I was eight years old, I put my hand on a hot stove burner and received circular welts for my stupidity and learned to not touch hot burners. The first time Joan and I visited Bishop's Castle, I was amazed to see kids running around the castle with no safety rails to protect them from falling. I spoke with Mr. Bishop about my concern and he said "Fear will keep them from falling." A few months ago, I was visiting a family and found it interesting to watch their toddler playing under the table. All was fine until he stood up and banged his head on the bottom of the table. After running to mommy and crying for awhile he returned to playing

under the table and a few minutes later he stood up and banged his head again and off he ran to mommy crying. I'm sure he learned not to stand up and bang his head but it took him awhile to fear it.

Fear has its place with children as they learn but it doesn't work well with adults.

Hell, the Ultimate Fear

When trying to deal with fear, ultimately, one has to come to terms with hell. The traditional understanding of hell is that it is a state of eternal suffering with no chance of rehabilitation. But, without rehabilitation what good is it? The thought of Hitler, Bin Ladin, or any other hated person suffering forever in hell may satisfy the human desire for revenge but their suffering accomplishes nothing else. It seems that God could hold people responsible for actions that merit hell in ways other than eternal punishment.

More than anything else, hell's main purpose is to motivate behavior. That was why mom included it in her "birds and the bees" talk and why churches feel compelled to assign it as a penalty for behavior they wish to prohibit.

It is difficult to reconcile a God of love with the concept of eternal hell. I am sure there is no one reading this who would allow their son or daughter to go into eternal torment. So how can we believe that God, who loves infinitely more than we do, will? Yet, we must take seriously scripture passages such as the last judgment in Matthew 25:31-46 and the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, where Jesus refers to eternal punishment. So often in these passages eternal punishment is emphasized, but the main point of these passages is not eternal punishment. It is to indicate what Jesus is passionate about and what he wants his follows to also embrace with passion, namely: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, comforting those in prison, and sharing wealth with the poor. According to Jesus, refusing to extend compassion to poor and suffering people carry the penalty of eternal punishment. Why? Because he wants his followers to take these activities very seriously. If we really feared eternal punishment for violating these passions of Christ, we would have more compassionate legislation dealing with the minimum wage, feeding and clothing the poor, immigration and prison reform, and taxation changes to reverse the ever widening gap between the rich and poor in our country. You can see why the powerful and elite during Jesus' time wanted him crucified.

Today, most hell enthusiasts would not include the violation of Jesus' passions as severe enough to warrant eternal punishment. Rather, issues dealing with sex and incorrect belief are perceived as more worthy of damnation. Unlike Jesus' passions, these serve to blame others for serious sin. They privatize Christianity and minimize conflict with the powerful and elite, thereby eliminating the possibility of "crucifixion".

Given the lack of passion for Jesus' passions in a country that is predominately Christian, it appears the threat of hell is not having its intended effects. Religion will probably always attempt to use fear to influence people. After all, Jesus did. Our challenge is to quiet the noise and listen closely to discern the compassionate voice of our Lord.

~PB