

**UNIVERSAL SALVATION?**  
**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan**  
**University Public Worship**  
**Stanford Memorial Church**  
**November 20, 2011**

"Just as you did it to one of the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me... I was hungry and you gave me food...I was a stranger and you welcomed me...I was in prison and you visited me."

I've always found today's lectionary reading from the gospel of Matthew<sup>i</sup> one of the most powerful in the Bible. It's Jesus' last teaching instructions to his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. It's a serious challenge to those who say that we're saved by faith alone, for this is all about works -- all about action.<sup>ii</sup> And Jesus is saying it's a matter of our eternal salvation: "Come...inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." But those who don't feed the hungry, don't welcome the stranger, and don't visit prisoners are told that they're accursed forever: "Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

Today I don't want to talk about this passage in relation to its social justice implications however. Or in relation to the theological debate about the relative virtues of faith and works. Instead, I want to address the heaven and hell aspects, or if you don't believe in an afterlife, I'd like to speak with you about inheriting the kingdom of God versus experiencing the fires of the devil, even here on earth. For this passage seems to contradict the image of Jesus as the good shepherd, always searching for the most lost of the sheep to be saved. As the prophet Ezekiel describes God's words in today's reading from the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible<sup>iii</sup>: "I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out, as shepherds seek out their flocks... I will

rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered... I will feed them with good pasture... I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak."

I'm a Unitarian Universalist minister, and my forebearers believed in universal salvation. That is, they believed that God, and his son Jesus, were unconditionally loving and ultimately would save every single human being -- they would find every lost sheep and protect it from the jaws of the wolves that would like to kill it and consume it. These were the kinds of passages they found in their Bibles and upon which they founded their conviction: In the Psalms it is said that "The Lord is gracious and merciful...abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made."<sup>iv</sup> The prophet Isaiah exclaimed, "All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God."<sup>v</sup> The gospel writer John quotes Jesus as promising that "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."<sup>vi</sup> The Apostle Paul told the Romans: "All Israel will be saved... For from him and through him and to him are all things."<sup>vii</sup> And the first letter to Timothy explained that "God our Savior...desires everyone to be saved,"<sup>viii</sup> while the second letter to Timothy states that "God...saved us... according to his own purpose and grace...before the ages began."<sup>ix</sup>

You may be asking about the word "saved" or "salvation". Does it really have any relevance to those of us who have doubts about the afterlife? A divinity school professor of mine, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, used to define "salvation" or "being saved" as having the ability to perceive our current life as meaningful, in contrast to nihilism and ultimate despair.<sup>x</sup> To be "saved" means not to be lost to alienation or anomie.<sup>xi</sup>

But the position of many, many Christian churches in America, especially those that are Evangelical in orientation, is emphatic that not all people will be saved, in this world or the next. In particular, those who have heard of Jesus Christ and don't accept him uniquely as God and as

their Lord and Savior will not be saved. They will be condemned eternally to hell. One authoritative statement of the worldwide Evangelical community is that "Those who reject Christ repudiate the joy of salvation and condemn themselves to eternal separation from God."<sup>xii</sup> As a well-respected Evangelical minister and writer, John Stott, has explained, "The hope of final salvation for everyone is a false hope, since it contradicts the recorded warnings of Jesus that the judgment will involve a separation into two opposite but equally eternal destinies."<sup>xiii</sup> He criticizes Pope John Paul II for having made this statement of what Stott calls "unconditional universalism" in his 1979 encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (a statement which Stott says must "be firmly rejected"): "Every ... [person] without any exception whatever -- has been redeemed by Christ, and... with each...[person] without any exception whatever -- Christ is in a way united, even when ...[that person] is unaware of it."<sup>xiv</sup>

My Universalist tradition in America, starting in the eighteenth century, with exemplars like John Murray, George DeBenneville, and Benjamin Rush, also denied the doctrine of eternal damnation, based on their reading of the Bible. They made it clear that this was not a new doctrine in their time, but went back to teachers at the very beginning of the church,<sup>xv</sup> reinforced by many to follow like church fathers Clement of Alexandria and Origen in the third century and Gregory of Nyssa and Eusebius in the fourth century. Augustine acknowledged in the fifth century that "very many" believed in the ultimate reconciliation of all people to God.<sup>xvi</sup> The Winchester Profession of the Universalist creed, adopted in America in 1803, stated: "We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in the one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness."<sup>xvii</sup>

The Universalists were split into two camps at the time, though. Some believed in no punishment whatsoever after death, and others believed in a period of limited punishment before one was restored to union with God.<sup>xviii</sup> By the nineteenth century, theologian Hosea Ballou was emphasizing what happens during life on earth. He explained that "sin was not punished after death...but during life itself, and there was accordingly no punishment afterward." For Ballou, hell exists here on earth, and it is "a state of rebellion against God and against the unity of humans and God. Heaven is the accomplishment of that unity."<sup>xix</sup>

The doctrine of universal salvation has been much in the American religious news this year, because the dynamic founder of an Evangelical mega-church in the Midwest, a graduate of the Evangelical Wheaton College in Illinois and the Evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in California, wrote a recently published book entitled *Love Wins*.<sup>xx</sup> He's explained that he had it published to combat the "misguided and toxic" belief that "a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better." Unfortunately, "It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus." In fact, Bell claims, this belief "subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear."<sup>xxi</sup> Bell reminds his readers that, "nothing in this book hasn't been taught, suggested or celebrated by many before me. I haven't come up with a radical new teaching that's any kind of radical departure from what's been said an untold number of times."<sup>xxii</sup>

Bell never claims in his book to be a universalist, but many critics of his book certainly have claimed he is.<sup>xxiii</sup> He has received a lot of criticism in Evangelical circles. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention last summer delivered a group rebuke to him for questioning

traditional views of hell in this book. They passed a resolution calling hell an "eternal, conscious punishment" for those who do not accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Bell quotes endless Biblical chapter and verse to establish that "when Jesus talked about heaven, he was talking about our present *eternal, intense, real* experiences of joy, peace and love in this life, this side of death *and* in the age to come. Heaven for Jesus wasn't just 'someday'; it was a present reality. Jesus blurs the lines, inviting...us into the merging of heaven and earth, the future and present, *here* and *now*. To say it again, eternal life is less about a kind of time that starts when we die, and more about a quality and vitality of life lived now in connection to God."<sup>xxv</sup>

Another approach Bell takes is reminding his readers of the Biblical notion that we were all made in the image of God. Every last one of us. The spark of the divine is always there within each of us, waiting to be fanned into flame. We do have a choice with our free will, though: "We can nurture and cultivate this divine image, or we can ignore, deny and stifle it..."<sup>xxvi</sup> At the same time, God, as well as his son Jesus, represents a shepherd who is concerned about every one of his sheep, and doesn't want to give up, ever, until everyone who has been lost is found.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Well, this is all well and good, but aren't we ignoring a significant part of the Biblical record when we make these assertions about universal salvation? Today's reading from Ezekiel has God saying that he will personally search for his sheep, bringing back the strayed, binding up the injured, and strengthening the weak. But the next line of the Biblical text, sounding like some in the Occupy Wall Street movement, states, "But the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice." God explains: "I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep... I will judge between sheep and sheep."<sup>xxviii</sup> And, likewise, Jesus in today's gospel

lesson describes a judgment day scene at the Second Coming of the Son of Man where people on the earth will be separated "one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."<sup>xxix</sup> Those who are blessed by God will inherit the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world, but those who are cursed will be sent into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. There will be a separation of those who have been righteous in their lives and those who have not, with one group of people slated to experience eternal life and the other condemned to eternal punishment. And there are plenty of other passages in the Bible of this ilk.

Rob Bell believes that these passages are intended "to wake us up to the timeless truth that history moves forward, not backward or sideways... While we continually find grace waiting to pick us up off the ground after we have fallen, there are realities to our choices. While we may get other opportunities, we won't get the one right in front of us again. That specific moment will pass and we will not [ever] see it again. It comes, it's here, it goes, and then it's gone. Jesus reminds us in a number of ways that it is vitally important we take our choices here and now as seriously as we possibly can... Jesus passionately urges us to live like the end is here, now, today."<sup>xxx</sup>

It may well be that a number of these passages are oriented to the fact that we operate with free will and may choose not to align ourselves with God at any particular time, or perhaps ever. Then, we won't be reaping the benefits of that relationship and will be ignoring, denying or stifling our divine image, with an immediate experience of separation from God, for better or for worse, depending on how we view it. However, there's more to these passages than just a worldly alienation from God that we may choose. They have a harshness, with specific destructive actions by God or the Son of Man described, which we who are universalists can't wish away. They are indeed difficult passages to deal with. When you're following the

Christian lectionary on a three-year cycle, as we do here in Stanford Memorial Church, these are the passages that I -- and all Christian clergy preaching from the Common Lectionary -- are confronted with today, November 20, 2011. We have to take them seriously and grapple with them. For myself, then, I need to try to look at the Biblical message as a whole, weighing all the texts and the counter-texts on whether or not there is universal salvation. On balance, I think that doctrine is right. God and Jesus for me come out as good shepherds who will always keep seeking us to save, in this life here and now and to the end of the age. As Rob Bell explains, "Love is what God is, love is why Jesus came, and love is why he continues to come, year after year to person after person."<sup>xxx</sup> In the words with which he ends his book, "May you experience this vast, expansive, infinite, indestructible love that has been yours all along. May you discover that this love is as wide as the sky and as small as the cracks in your heart no one else knows about. And may you know, deep in your bones, that love wins."<sup>xxxii</sup>

## **BENEDICTION**

(The benediction today is taken from the words of 18th century Universalist preacher John Murray:)

Go out into the highways and by-ways.

Give people something of your new vision.

You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine.

Use it to bring more light and understanding

to the hearts and minds of men and women.

Give them not hell, but hope and courage.

Preach the kindness and everlasting love of God. AMEN.

## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Matthew 25: 31-46.
- <sup>ii</sup> *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 455.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24.
- <sup>iv</sup> Psalm 145: 8-9.
- <sup>v</sup> Isaiah 52:10.
- <sup>vi</sup> John 12:32.
- <sup>vii</sup> Romans 11: 26, 36.
- <sup>viii</sup> 1 Timothy 2: 3-4.
- <sup>ix</sup> 2 Timothy 1:9.
- <sup>x</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 114.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- <sup>xii</sup> Congress on World Evangelization, "Lausanne Covenant" (1974) as cited in David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 320.
- <sup>xiii</sup> John Stott in Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, p. 319.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), as cited in Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, p. 325.
- <sup>xv</sup> David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 49.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), pp. 107-108.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, p. 56.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- <sup>xix</sup> Hosea Ballou, as quoted in Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, pp. 65-66.
- <sup>xx</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> See for example, Mark Galli, "Rob Bell's Bridge Too Far," *Christianity Today* (April, 2011).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Adelle M. Banks, "Southern Baptists affirm belief in 'eternal' hell." *Christian Century* (July 12, 2011), Vol. 128, Issue 14, p. 15.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, p. 58-59.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Ezekiel 34: 20, 22.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Matthew 25: 32.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, p. 197.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197-198.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.