

**May 6, 2011**

***“Echoes of the Heart”***

*Reflections on Life and Community Living*

**Is hell dead?** Believe it or not, this is the title of the lead article in the April 25, 2011 issue of TIME Magazine. This is all in response to a new, best-selling book by popular evangelical Christian pastor, Rob Bell, entitled *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*.

As a Christian pastor in the *United Church of Christ*, a progressive denomination that advocates reading the Bible in light of its historical context, as opposed to literally, this suggestive question sort of caught me off guard. My immediate reaction was something like: *was it ever alive* (a literal understanding of hell)?

One of the beautiful things about America, of course, is the *freedom of religion* inscribed in our Constitution. We are all free to believe what we choose based on how the spirit moves in our lives.

Still, it is revealing how—in the Church—there is such vast diversity of belief. With regard to hell, I can't remember ever understanding the concept in a literal sense, as if it were an actual, physical place. The same applies to heaven.

**Heaven and hell as metaphor.** For me, heaven and hell have meaning as metaphors that describe the spirit of life here on earth. Sometimes, our lives are a *living hell*; other times our lives are *heaven on earth*. Indeed, we casually use these expressions as part of our common discourse.

*Hell* is the experience of a personal darkness that sucks the life out of our spirit. It is knowing excruciatingly difficult times—times of personal struggle, grief, pain and anxiety. *It's been a living hell*, we say, in the popular vernacular.

*Heaven*, on the other hand, is something quite different. It is the experience of joy and happiness. It's the profound exultation of personal health and well being; it's the deep fulfillment of relationships that give meaning to our lives. *Heaven* is to live the life where many of our hopes and dreams are realized in the here and now.

Taken as metaphor, therefore, *hell* is very much alive. However, when the Church, for example, takes *hell* literally, as if it were some actual place of endless torture and suffering, a whole *other* dynamic comes in to play. *Hell* becomes a tool for controlling people's behavior out of fear of eternal punishment and damnation. What a repellent, unloving concept!

If we assume the God of faith is a God of infinite love, then how would such a loving God condemn anyone to such a hopeless fate? In reflections on God's nature, it is important to remember that for the God revealed in the Bible—always—God's grace is

greater than God's judgment. The God of the Bible believes in forgiveness and new beginnings.

**The problem of evil?** Still, if everyone is saved, what about the problem of evil and the sinful, malevolent things people do? If we are all going to be saved anyway, what is the motivation to be a good person and to do good deeds in the world? Good question. However, can't it be that love is its own motivation because love fills our spirit with the life-force that emanates from the spirit of God, and God *is about* life?

In other words, we are relational creatures, which means we both influence and are influenced by others. Therefore, what we do matters because, inexorably, it affects the web of life in which all of us are participants. In this sense, the adage is true: *what goes around comes around*.

Returning to our initial question about hell, *hell* is an idea, a concept that can be useful in considerations of the ethical and moral consequences of our life-choices. The best of God wants everyone to be saved. The best of faith hopes everyone seeks to do good. This best is always understood in a social, relational context.

Again, love is its own motivation. Our life-purpose as people of faith is to love one another as God has loved us. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13: *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. Love never ends.*

It is this love, not fear rooted in some manipulative notion of *hell*, that brings redemption and salvation to the world.