

Good Intentions ...

Sermon preached by Stephen Bouma

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I expect everyone here to disagree with at least one thing I say today. I'm counting on it. I hope to provoke you: to think, to question, to muse. Heaven and Hell have been the topic of many sermons and conversations throughout history. We debate what they are, whether they really exist, and how to get to each one. We use them as comparisons to what our world should or shouldn't be like. We use them as goals or precautionary warnings for behavior modification. So today I will enter this discussion. Today I want to briefly explore concepts of the hereafter as practical reality and as ideals or models.

I hold only a few strong theological positions, but I do not believe in a traditional concept of hell. I refuse. I find it unacceptable that any just or loving God would banish any soul to eternal, hopeless torment. I cannot reconcile a loving God with eternal damnation and frankly, if I am wrong I would rather go to hell myself than to worship a God who might banish me there. I'm taking a stand, and it's for ultimate forgiveness. Once I had a conversation with Lyn's sister Tracy about hell. We concluded that I do face the real possibility of ending up standing in a pit up to my neck in something very unpleasant with an angry finger raised in a general upward direction.

I am willing to take these risks partly because of the practical problems I see with the administration of hell. Consider our possible psychological reactions to eternal damnation. It wouldn't take me that long to get used to it. After all, I have seven older brothers and sisters. With no escape, I'd get used to the temperature down there. I've always been a very sweaty person, and that makes heat more bearable. Getting used to it would alleviate the hellishness. Can hell coexist with hope? Could we by our reactions defy God's plan? What if we determinedly responded to every punishment with enjoyment and hope? "After all, it could be worse." Any shred of positive thinking could ease suffering in hell. My point is that God needs at least a little cooperation to create true hell.

The ideas of heaven and hell are deadly serious, so to speak, but ironically I have difficulty taking them seriously because of death: the end of our physical bodies, the end of our material existence. Virtually all of our practical personality and concepts are appendages of our physical state as biological units with senses, needs and limits and biological responses which are intrinsically connected to our intellects, to our ideals and thus to our souls.

When death ends my body, my brain, my limits, my strengths, my world, what is it that is fundamental to my identity which could survive that? I have wondered whether it might be memory. Maybe we spend our lives creating the memories which will accompany us through eternity. Scientists have shown a connection between certain neural pathways and memory, and they have come to the conclusion that that these pathways enable memory. I think the term enablement could be poignantly apt, for I believe that memory might conceivably be trapped within these paths during our lifetimes and will be freed upon our deaths. This scenario might provide us with a panoramic view of our lives when we expire. Right now our remembrance is clouded and spotty: full of gaps, but then it might be crystalline in its clarity and totally complete. The revealing of such a memory might be heaven or hell, depending on the details of our memories. What kind of memories should we create to enrich such an

afterlife? It makes me want to create a history for myself with rich experiences, fulfilling pastimes and loving relationships. It also makes me want to help others to do the same. Pleasure seems obvious, but rather shallow to take me through eternity. Some experiences which might not immediately seem positive are worth remembering. Work is something great to be remembered, pain can be a positive memory, if there's distance for perspective. Challenges overcome, frustrations conquered, people I helped and learned to appreciate, all sorts of relationships. These might form a life memory worth taking me through eternity. But my vision is strange. Is there time in heaven? What would memory be like in a heaven with no future? Would the past become distorted also? How would the perfect perception of memories be without any ability to reach into them and affect them? Imagine an eternal loop of your greatest gaffes, your biggest failures, and your most embarrassing moments? What is a past without the future to balance it? Is perception without the ability to change things heaven, or hell?

Somewhere I shifted to the ideals of the hereafter rather than the practical concepts, but it's hard to talk about a practical heaven without mostly discussing ideas and ideals. What would we get in paradise? Relaxation? Comfort? Affirmation? Cool breezes? Warm breezes? It could get boring really fast unless we are in an appreciative mood, which could also get boring.

I believe hell is a creation of humans, so in my personal doctrine I must include both hope and possible escape within its parameters. When I picture heaven, I sometimes imagine meeting everyone who has been relevant to my life on their own terms, at their best, or as they see themselves at their best. We might meet outside of time and need, or maybe we might meet everyone in their prime. I would love to experience my parents or grandparents as young people, to discover from a much closer perspective what their youth and prime were like. That might be heaven-like. I regret not knowing them as anything but ancestors. That could be an enriching phase of a heaven type afterlife. Another idea I regularly entertain is that heaven and hell might be very similar to each other, but our reaction might determine what we call the afterlife. If we are appreciative and hopeful, then we end up in heaven, if we are disappointed and despairing, then we are in hell. I keep returning to that idea.

I once got into a heartfelt discussion of heaven with a group of students waiting for an audition. I mentioned one of my favorite ideas: heaven as an eternal choir rehearsal. Except all the singers are great, the conductor is God and the music is constantly challenging but achievable, and the voices never run out. They just keep getting stronger and stronger. One girl said heaven would be like our lives here, only less confusing. Another girl said that there are certain souls around which each person is most comfortable, and in the afterlife we somehow gravitate back to the souls which are most compatible with ours. Yet another girl said she thought that we were all completely wrong, that heaven is utterly inconceivable to human understanding. I disagree with that position through basic logic. Heaven cannot by definition be inconceivable, because then we couldn't possibly know whether we wanted to make any effort at all to get there! If we have no inkling of the heavenly, then we have no clue whether we will like it! Why would God put us on earth as a prelude to heaven if the two places have no connection? Why does the Bible take time to describe heaven and virtue, and to describe what heaven is not? So I reaffirm my vision of heaven as an ideal choir rehearsal, because good choir rehearsals aim for pretty admirable goals...

fellowship to the point of communion, and cooperative effort aimed solely at the creation of beauty and praise. ADVERT moment

A kind of Hell exists here on earth when people allow themselves to hate and seethe with anger. I have heard it said that we are all in heaven or hell right now and it is simply our reaction to our existence which creates heaven or hell. Despite the monumental material and tangible differences in our lives, everyone is given chances for meaning, joy and hope and fellowship. When we partake we are in heaven, when we do not, we are in hell. A pattern is emerging in this sermon: heaven and hell can be defined by our will and our emotional responses to basically anything.

Whenever I ask others what heaven is like, their answers are a reflection of their wishes and their present condition. Lonely people want company, busy people want to relax, bored people want meaning, hurt people want answers, and happy people want to share.

Heaven on earth: it's a very powerful Christian ideal. It isn't reached by trying to get there, but by being good. I generally find my best self in sharing ideas and beauty. But everyone has a unique offering of good will. Some people serve, some share, some give, some affirm, some hug, some laugh, some make others laugh, some listen, some talk. The list goes on.

I believe that love and beauty are connected, and heaven on earth is fostered by beauty and love. I am not talking about loving someone because they are beautiful, but seeing the beauty in loving acts and motivation. Hate is ugly. Anger is ugly. Selfishness is ugly. So logically their opposites are beautiful. I am an artist so I see things in terms of beauty, but I believe that beauty is a fundamental positive aspect of love. When we do charitable things out of thankless duty or drudging habit, the beauty has been sucked out of love and our efforts are undermined. Alexander Pope wrote "To enjoy is to obey" God. He meant that it isn't enough to do the right thing. You must find ways to be happy in those actions, and that definitely means that time must be spent on one's own happiness and well-being. An unhappy saint is no saint. Unhappy sainthood is an unstable state. It cannot last. We need to nurture a balance of our own happiness within our will to do good. Immanuel Kant wrote that nothing is moral except a good will, or good intentions. He implied that our actions or even the results of our actions are not moral. Our intent is the essence of our morals. We could respond to that idea by thinking that as long as we try, it doesn't matter what happens. While that is a very dangerous idea, we do need to understand that even the most informed and conscientious charitable work often has mixed results and sometimes the most useless gestures are full of God's approval. We are much more responsible for what we want, and what we try to do in the service of what we want than we are for our actual actions, or the results of those actions. If we only want to help ourselves, that is bad. If we have compassion and act on it, that is good. I generally have experienced that my own happiness has come more from trying to make others happy than from trying to make myself happy.

The science of physics makes another good argument for complete material predestination: nothing you do comes from you. Nothing you try will change what would have happened. But physics doesn't even address trying itself, or hope, or the will to change, because physics doesn't explain or even really refer to consciousness. Pure physics says we should remember the future, and since we don't remember the future,

there is clearly something incomplete in the science of physics as it pertains to consciousness. This mind here that perceives and enjoys and loves and helps isn't remotely explained by hard science. So maybe the practical physical outcome of history will never be changed by our efforts, but that doesn't really matter because we can make great effort to do the right thing, and to find the beauty in being loving creatures. I'm not saying that we shouldn't try to make heaven on earth. We should, with all our hearts and minds and strength. I am saying that the willing to do good and the enjoyment of the process are the real centers of importance in loving, heaven and morality.

Angels are the denizens of heaven. What are they? I hope that there aren't dead people watching my every move, because my private life is kind of pathetic and I could never face them later if that were the case. Except maybe that's an initiation to heaven: the big reveal of and living down of one's lifetime of shortcomings, stupidities and selfishness. It would be a moment of purgatory to realize that everyone who dies before you knows ALL of your secrets, and then it would be an uplifting to get past that to the understanding that those deep dark secrets are common, mostly unimportant and certainly better forgotten: getting past our secrets to a place with no judgement and total appreciation. That might be heaven. Try to imagine a place with no secrets, no deception, no hiding, just total open acceptance. The term "Naked and unashamed" comes to mind. I know that I would feel more naked standing here without my secrets than without my clothes. I think judgment would have to be lacking among that heavenly host. I think maybe most of us are unfit to be naked and unashamed. We have too many secrets and too much judgment.

Once again I have returned obliquely to the idea that what might be angelic might also be diabolic depending upon our attitude. An attitude of contentment, helpfulness and giving is heavenly. It creates heaven and promotes heaven. An attitude of secrecy, selfishness and judgment goes the other way. After all, the more you have, the more you have to lose. Ownership creates fear, the fear of loss. Secrecy creates fear, the fear of revelation. So the heavenly host has shared their secrets, they have seen it all, and our petty and heinous shortcomings are already known. I think these ideas are also a model for goodness on earth, though I confess that I will take some of my secrets to my grave.

Where does that leave us? Logically death will end us, so practical discussions of real afterlife are strictly hypothetical. These discussions probably have merit only as ideals and models for bringing the realm of God, or the realm of love and happiness and beauty to our present existence. While we probably have little control over material outcomes, we can control our will for good, and our enjoyment of the process. So that arena is the place to concentrate our efforts. I see a correlation between the will to good in any given person and their general happiness and the general promotion of contentment for everyone. So the formula is easy. Try, keep trying, and enjoy the ride. Hope for the best, and make every effort to create the best. I am again reminded of Morgan Freeman as God. His character said "If you want a miracle, be the miracle." My paraphrase of him this week is this. If you want to live in heaven on earth, be an angel; and if you don't want to be an angel, then you probably don't want to bring heaven to earth.