

Rolheiser: Who goes to Hell, and who doesn't?

Hell is never a nasty surprise waiting for a basically happy person. Nor is it necessarily a predictable ending for an unhappy, bitter person. Can a happy, warm-hearted person go to hell? Can an unhappy, bitter person go to heaven? That's all contingent upon how we understand hell and how we read the human heart.

A person who is struggling honestly to be happy cannot go to hell since hell is the antithesis of an honest struggle to be happy. Hell, in Pope Francis' words, "is wanting to be distant from God's love." Anyone who sincerely wants love and happiness will never be condemned to an eternity of alienation, emptiness, bitterness, anger, and hatred (which are what constitute the fires of hell) because hell is wanting not to be in heaven. Thus there's no one in hell who's sincerely longing for another chance to mend things so as to go to heaven. If there's anyone in hell, it's because that person truly wants to be distant from love.

But can someone really want to be distant from God's love and from human love? The answer is complex because we're complex: What does it mean to want something? Can we want something and not want it all at the same time? Yes, because there are different levels to the human psyche and consequently the same desire can be in conflict with itself.

We can want something and not want it all at the same time. That's a common experience. For instance, take a young child who has just been disciplined by his mother. At that moment, the child can bitterly hate his mother, even as at another, more inchoate, level what he most desperately wants is in fact his mother's embrace. But until his sulk ends he wants to be distant from his mother, even as his deepest want is to be with his mother. We know the feeling.

Hatred, as we know, is not opposite of love but simply one modality of love's grieving and so this type of dynamic perennially plays itself out in the befuddling, complex, paradoxical relationship that millions of us have with God, the church, with each other, and with love itself. Our wounds are mostly not our own fault but the result of an abuse, a violation, a betrayal, or some traumatic negligence within the circle of love. However this doesn't preclude them doing funny things to us. When we're wounded in love, then, like a reprimanded, sulking child who wants distance from his mother, we too can for a time, perhaps for a lifetime, not want heaven because we feel that we've been unfairly treated by it. It's natural for many people to want to be distant from God. The child bullied on the playground who identifies his or her bullies with the inner circle of "the accepted ones" will understandably want to be distant from that circle – or perhaps even do violence to it.

However that's at one level of soul. At a deeper level, our ultimate longing is still to be inside of that circle of love which we at that moment seemingly hate, hate because we feel that we've been unfairly excluded from it or violated by it and hence deem it to be something we want no part of. Thus someone can be very sincere of soul and yet because of deep wounds to her soul go through life and die wanting to be distant what she perceives as God, love, and heaven. But we may not make a simplistic judgment here.

We need to distinguish between what at a given moment we explicitly want and what, at that same moment, we implicitly (really) want. They're often not the same. The reprimanded child seemingly wants distance from his mother, even as at another level he desperately wants it.

Many people want distance from God and the churches, even as at another level they don't. But God reads the heart, recognizes the untruth hiding inside a sulk or a pout, and judges accordingly. That's why we shouldn't be so quick to fill up hell with everyone who appears to want distance from love, faith, church, and God. God's love can encompass, empathize with, melt down, and heal that hatred. Our love should too.

Christian hope asks us to believe things that go against our natural instincts and emotions and one of these is that God's love is so powerful that, just as it did at Jesus' death, it can descend into hell itself and there breathe love and forgiveness into both the most wounded and most hardened of souls. Hope asks us to believe that the final triumph of God's love will be when the Lucifer himself converts, returns to heaven, and hell is finally empty.

Fanciful? No. That's Christian hope; it's what many of our great saints believed.

Yes, there's a hell and, given human freedom, it's always a radical possibility for everyone; but, given God's love, perhaps sometime it will be completely empty.