

Something Worth Going to Hell For

Luke 4: 16-30

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

July 15, 2012

My favorite part of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* [ch. 31] comes when Huck struggles with a decision about whether to turn in the runaway slave Jim, now that he has been captured by a white man who doesn't know who Jim's owner is. Huck feels guilty for violating the moral codes of his society by being friendly to a runaway, who was nothing more than stolen property in the eyes of the law. (Fair warning: I'm going to read the original version, with the "n" word.)

The more I studied about this, the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked and low-down and ornery I got to feeling. And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there's One that's always on the lookout, and ain't agoing to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself, by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn't so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, "There was the Sunday school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire."

It made me shiver. And I about made up my mind to pray; and see if I couldn't try to quit being the kind of a boy I was, and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come. Why wouldn't they? It warn't no use to try and hide it from Him. Nor from me, neither. I knowed very well why they wouldn't come. It was because my heart warn't right; it was because I warn't square; it was because I was playing double. I was letting on to give up sin, but away inside of me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth say I would do the right thing and the clean thing, and go and write to that nigger's owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie-and He knowed it. You can't pray a lie- I found that out.

So I was full of trouble, full as I could be; and didn't know what to do. At last I had an idea; and I says, I'll go and write the letter- and then see if I can pray. Why, it was astonishing, the way I felt as light as a feather, right straight off, and my troubles all gone. So I got a piece of paper and a pencil, all glad and excited, and set down and wrote:

Miss Watson your runaway nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send. HUCK FINN

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking- thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time; in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him agin in the swamp, up there where

the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had smallpox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll go to hell"- and tore it up.

It was awful thoughts, and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head; and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter, I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.

Mark Twain is telling us—with tremendous irony—that sometimes making the right choice means doing what religion says will send us to hell. I think he is depicting a stage in human moral development. There is a stage of life when morality is all about following rules that have been given to us. If we follow them, we feel that we are good; if we don't, we feel that we are bad. But sometimes—if we are lucky—we come face to face with a moral choice that turns that upside down. There is something that our sense of justice or the ethic of love tells us is the right thing to do, but religion is telling us that it is wrong. We know that if we do the right thing, the religious people and the moral arbiters of our subculture will consider us to have sinned because we will have broken their code. As far as they are concerned, we will go to hell. To stick to the example of Huck Finn, in our own culture there are people who think you will go to hell if you say the "n" word, and there are people who think you will go to hell if you harbor illegals. Huck faces this choice with Jim. He can do the so-called right thing and let Jim's owner know where to reclaim her property, because property rights are the supreme value. Or he can do the sinful thing, the illegal thing, and treat Jim as a human being whom he loves. Huck has to decide for himself to do the right thing at any cost, even if it means that, according to the religion he's been taught, he will go to hell.

Of course Mark Twain does not think that Huck will go to hell for saving Jim. But he certainly makes it sound as if Huck thinks so. On one level Huck thinks that if there is a God whose demands are so opposite of the demands of love, he will just have to set that God aside and suffer the consequences. But on another level Huck suspects that the moral code he has been taught—that property rights trump human rights, that black people must be treated as inferior—does not jive with the real order of things, that something is wrong with civilization, and maybe true justice lies beyond civilization in a realm of individual choice and freedom.

Everybody needs to find something worth going to hell for. I'm not talking about going to hell for being naughty. Mark Twain is not talking about Huck going to hell for running away or skipping school or playing a prank with a dead cat. He's talking about going to hell for doing something *for others* that religion deems a sin.

Jesus was a man who refused to do what religion demanded. The story we read from Luke 4 comes right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, right after he is baptized and then tempted in the desert by the devil. Jesus has just started to teach in synagogues, and he comes to his home town of Nazareth. It starts out well. He reads from the scroll of Isaiah words that in the

context of today's politics sound pretty radical. Jesus claims the words of the prophet as applying to himself: God's Spirit is on him; his mission is to bring good news to the poor; he has been sent to liberate people in prison; he is going to give sight to the blind, and to set oppressed people free. Now here's the surprising thing to me: the people love it! I think I know why: what they heard was mostly, in the words of Stephen Stills, "hooray for our side." We are the poor; we are the oppressed; God is on our side.

But Jesus never knew when to leave well enough alone. Maybe that's why I identify with him. He came to his hometown and he had a burr under his saddle. The Jews in Galilee were a little like today's Israeli settlers in the West Bank, obsessed over their Jewish identity, defining themselves over against the non-Jews. Jesus felt about Jewish exceptionalism the way I feel about American exceptionalism; it just stuck in his craw. So he just had to add to his sermon: "Remember back in the old days of the prophet Elijah? There was no shortage of widows in Israel who needed a miracle. But who did God send Elijah to? God sent him to a foreigner. And remember the days of the prophet Elisha? There was no shortage of lepers in Israel, but none of them got the miracle of healing—only Naaman the Syrian, a foreigner. What's up with that?"

So Jesus challenged their nationalism and their racism, and what happened? "All in the synagogue were filled with rage." They tried to throw him off their local equivalent of Mohegan Bluffs. This is Jesus' first "I'll go to hell" moment. The religion of his day was focused on drawing clear boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, between us and them. A core teaching of religion was that we are God's people and they are not. If you ate with a Gentile, you were unclean and under God's judgment. If you married a Gentile, you were no longer part of God's people. If you taught that God loved Gentiles just as God loves Israel, you got run out of town.

There were plenty of other times when Jesus chose to be placed in hell by the religious leaders. They told him he had no right to forgive sins—that was God's job—and Jesus said, "All right then, I'll go to hell." They told him he could not heal on the Sabbath or let his disciples pick grain to eat on the Sabbath, and Jesus said, "All right then, I'll go to hell." They told him that he should not associate with prostitutes or tax collectors, and they called him a "friend of sinners" and a "winebibber." and Jesus said, "All right then, I'll go to hell." And in the end, of course, Jesus *did* go to hell. He went to the cross and to the grave and he descended into hell, but God raised him up and gave him the name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

I want you to think about the moral development of one of Jesus' first students, Peter. Peter had to learn about the breadth of God's love. Even after Jesus was raised from the dead and the Spirit fell on him at Pentecost, Peter still thought that the kingdom of God was only for Jews. That was the way he had been raised. There were insiders and outsiders. Just as Huck Finn had been raised with the strict moral code of apartheid, Peter had been raised with religious apartheid.

But Acts 8 tells an incredible story. God loved an Italian named Cornelius—not only a white man, a European rather than a Semite, but also a part of the occupation army that was the enemy of the Jewish nation. God told Cornelius to send some of his staff to another town to fetch Peter, the leader of the Christians. While they were on route to Peter's house, Peter had a dream of a large sheet being lowered from heaven with all kinds of non-kosher animals that Peter would never dream of eating. But the voice from heaven said, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat," which crept Peter out. That happened three times.

Just then there was a knock on the door and these messengers from Cornelius told Peter that God had told this Italian to invite Peter to his house. This was a moral dilemma. Religion

told Peter that he must not go into this foreigner's house. His conscience told him that it was wrong. He could hear his mother's voice in the back of his head: "Don't go in there." Unless you have spent time in orthodox Jewish communities, you can't imagine what Peter went through. But God's Spirit was telling him something else. The dream and the circumstances were telling him something else. Finally Peter said to himself, "All right then, I'll *go* to hell." He went to the house of this European and said, "Now I understand that God shows no partiality to people of any nation."

Everybody needs to find something worth going to hell for. If all you ever do is to follow conventional morality and conventional religion, you will lose your self. The only way to save your self, Jesus said, is to lose it. There has to be something in your life that the world says is off-base, that the religious establishment says is wrong, something that puts you at such odds with your culture that people are willing to condemn you to hell. That's when you know that you have made a choice—not just a choice to go along with a religious majority or an in-group, but a choice to follow Jesus. If you never make a choice that is *against* your culture, how do you know that you have made a choice at all?

A lot of things are *not* worth going to hell for. Most people who decide to go to hell do it because they are selfish. They decide to go to hell for the sake of pleasure or adolescent rebellion or pure meanness. Sometimes they decide to go to hell because they think that their lustful passion is more loving than staying faithful to the person to whom they have spoken vows. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about going to hell, so to speak, in the eyes of your peers because you stand for something right that they think is wrong.

Martin Luther was condemned to hell because he said the pope had no right to sell forgiveness of sins. Thomas Helwys, one of the first English Baptist pastors, was condemned to hell because he told the King in a personal note that the King has no authority over souls. Many others have been condemned to hell by the church because they taught new scientific discoveries or because they said grace is available outside the church or because they denied the divine right of kings. In my own lifetime, I've had church people condemn me to hell as unbiblical because I thought white boys and black girls should socialize, because (in high school) I refused to salute the flag of a nation that was bombing civilians, by the Southern Baptists because I thought women could preach, because I thought gays should be included in the church. Sometimes you have to wrestle with the way you were raised, or wrestle with what you once believed about an issue, and come out bruised but determined to do what is right.

As Mark Twain meant to tell us, the struggle with our own consciences is often a struggle against the values of sick religion or an oppressive society, not a struggle against God. When we decide that we simply have to do what is right rather than what religion requires, we are sometimes choosing the will of God over the expectations of society. Where is the place where you have decided to stand, like Jesus, *against* the demands of religion and *for* the love and justice of God?