Do you secretly relish idea of hell?

BY THE REV. MICHAEL S. USEY

One way or another, hell is talked about quite a bit. The most popular use is when one talks about taking one's hammer to one's hairbrush or when one's car is cut off by a sports car on Interstate 40. Then hammer, car, and driver are frequently wished straight to hell, or at least somewhere very near it — like Atlanta.

The religious community in general (and the Christian community specifically) is a variation on that theme. Many of us religious folk believe those who do not fulfill our requirements of faith are headed for hell. Those outside the church, those who have trouble believing a specific tenet of faith, or those who do some forbidden but fun action, are on the road to damnation. We have tried to herd the "lost" into the gates of heaven by using hell as our fiery cattle prod.

In contrast, Jesus of Nazareth suggests that hell is for the religious community. To the religious of his day, Jesus spoke of repentance, forgiveness, and of his Father's undying and outrageous love. But he warned the religious of his day of hell.

He spoke as if hell were a real possibility for his own disciples. And, to some of the religious leaders of his day, Jesus had these harsh words: "You snakes, you vipers' brood, how can you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:33).

These are not exactly the mild-mannered words of the effeminate person that many assume Jesus to be.

Jesus loved the Pharisees, but he wanted them to know how far some of them were from the kingdom of God. We, the religious of our day, seldom think Jesus might speak similar words to us. We glibly assume the words of forgiveness (originally spoken to cheaters, whores, crooks and phonies who responded to Jesus) are for us. How surprised most of us would be if Jesus' opening words to the Southern Baptist Convention were to be: "You snakes, how are you going to escape the fires of hell?"

Statements such as, "I didn't say it; God did," signal the implicit arrogance that our words coincide with God's. There is far too much glee and false piety in this doctrine of hell for me. I suspect that many of us, in our heart of hearts, enjoy the notion of hell, the thought that someday all those who disagree with us will have to suffer. I side with David Buttrick: "Believe in hell if you like, but, for God's sake, don't enjoy it." No one ought to call himself a Christian who doesn't at least wish for the salvation of all people; indeed, the whole planet.

So let us drop this heresy that places us in God's love and others outside of it. Jesus never talked about hell with the irreligious; he only spoke of it to the religious people: his disciples and some of the religious leaders of his day. Let us refrain from placing Iraqis, homosexuals, people of other faiths, felons, and others in hell. Every person is precious to God. As a friend of mine says, "Every one should have to spend three weeks in hell for what he or she has done to other people."

If hell is for those who think they are good, then we religious folk had better be buried in asbestos pajamas. Because heaven is the place for people who know how badly they have behaved and how much they need God's love.
There is room in hell for unbelievers, too

In his column (Religion Page, July 1), Rev. Michael S. Usley, a Baptist pastor, states that Jesus suggested hell was for the religious rather than sinners. Jesus did threaten the religious leaders of his day with hell, but it was because of their hypocrisy not because they were religious (Matt. 23).

If Usley believes that hell is only for the religious, I wonder why he is a pastor. If I were part of his flock, you would probably find me elsewhere on Sunday instead of being religious by attending worship.

He writes, "Imagine this at the end of time, people will stand before God and God says, 'Life was hard, you hurt both others and yourself. You're forgiven. Enter into my joy.'" God tells us exactly who is hell-bound. We don't have to imagine (Rev. 21:8). I don't find religious people mentioned unless they stopped being religious and became unbelievers.

Usley and I are in complete agreement that religious people can be lost. The doctrine of "once saved always saved" is completely foreign to Scriptures. The Jewish leaders were God's "chosen people" and they were threatened with hell. No one should ever relish the idea of hell. As Christians, we should have the same desire of God "Who wants all to be saved" (I Tim. 2:4). God has given us the Bible, informing us how we can avoid hell. Unbelievers are condemned; believers are not (John 3:18).

Jack Nunn
Eden
The Christian life takes courage

BY MICHAEL S. USEY
Special to the News & Record

The Olympics start next Friday, and many of us will watch in wonder at the grace, courage, strength and discipline of the world’s greatest athletes. We’ll also be watching for those catchy commercials that always accompany sporting events, but which have no connection to physical fitness; after all, eating at McDonald’s does not help you win the high jump.

My favorite Olympic moment took place in 1976, the summer after I graduated from high school. That year, the Japanese men’s gymnastics team was seeking its fifth-straight team gold. Each team uses six entrants, with the five highest scores counting. During the floor exercise, Shun Fujimoto broke his right knee. Olympic rules prevented him from using a pain-killer, but he continued — without telling his teammates the full extent of the injury.

"The competition was so close," he said later. "I didn’t want them to lose their concentration with worry about me."

On the side horse, an exercise that does not terribly stress the knees, Fujimoto scored 9.5 points of a possible 10. Next came the rings.

"I knew when I descended from the rings, it would be the most painful moment," he said. "I also knew that if my posture was not good when I landed, I would not receive a good score. (I decided that) I must try to forget the pain."

I remember watching him execute a double twist and stick his
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landing with both feet. The pain must have excruciating. Despite his broken knee, he landed almost perfectly, ramrod straight; his injured leg raised ever so slightly. Upon landing, he smiled for the judges and held his position before his leg buckled. The judges awarded Fujimoto a 9.7. Television showed his landing repeatedly for the next several days. Every time I saw his dismount, his courage took my breath away, and I held my knee. Imagine spinning off the rings and keeping your concentration, knowing that you would land on a broken knee.

The Christian life is about courage: the courage to follow Christ, standing alone if need be, despite emotional pain or loss of money or friendships. To be courageous also means not whining — facing the demanding times of obeying Jesus’ difficult commands without complaint and without drawing attention to your sacrifice. The Christian life is also about excellence: countering our culture of mediocrity by offering to God our best, our virtue, our excellence. To live in the manner of Jesus means to live out both courage and excellence. Fujimoto showed both courage and excellence for the sake of a sport and for national pride, such small things in comparison to our calling in Christ. To follow Jesus is not an easy thing to do, and the way will likely have both pain and victory.

After the event, Japanese officials wouldn’t let Fujimoto continue, although he wanted to. His teammates pressed on, knowing they had no room for error. When the final scores were tabulated, Japan had won, and the victory was dedicated to Fujimoto.

The margin of victory? Four-tenths of a point.

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Hail to a preacher who’s above the fray

Though not a Baptist or a member of his congregation, I would like to express my admiration of Michael Usey, pastor of the College Park Baptist Church. He has consistently raised his voice of love, reason and tolerance above the hysterical cacophony of homophobia audible from other parts of our religious community. He has also had the courage to be an individual within a conservative denomination and to preach what I see as a more pure form of Christianity — an inclusive message of acceptance, not judgment. Oh, how I wish there were more of his kind.

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