

We've got two topics this morning: one is hell, and the other is limbo. Let's talk about hell first. I hope what I have to say will surprise you.

When Jesus died on the cross for us, he opened his arms wide like this [arms opened wide]. That gesture of love is a pretty good summary of what the Christian life is all about. At its center, the Christian life is about God's love. God's arms are always open to receive us with his love.

Contrary to popular opinion, the center of the Christian is not about *us*. It is not about our successes and failures in our struggle to be good in this life. It is not about our reward or punishment in the next life. The center of the Christian life is God, not us. The center of the Christian life is God's constant and abiding love for us.

The Church has always taught that hell exists. There is no denying that we can make life hell for ourselves, and that this terrible condition of our hearts and souls can continue into eternity.

What is hell? Hell is what happens when we permanently do not open our hearts and souls *at all* to the love of God. It looks like *this* [both hands in front, palms outward, pushing love away]. In the situation of hell, we choose not to let even the slightest ray of God's love shine into the darkness of our hearts.

Let's be completely clear about this: This total permanent darkness of separation from God's love is *not* God punishing us. God *never* does that. God does not punish us; we punish ourselves. Our God is a God of love, not of punishment. *We* create hell for ourselves. God leaves us free to do that, if we so desire.

To sum up: Hell does exist. We create it. God is not punishing us; we're punishing ourselves. That leads us to one final question about hell: How many of us end up in that condition? The answer is: Only God knows. But if you want to know my personal experience as a minister in the Church, I have never met anyone who seemed headed in that direction. Yes, I've met people who have done terrible things, but my sense was that they didn't have much free will. The circumstances of their early lives had severely limited the growth of their free will. I don't think they were acting very freely when they made these terrible choices.

We also have a second topic this morning: the subject of limbo. How many of you have ever heard of limbo? [pause] That's what I thought—quite of few of you. Limbo has never been an official teaching of the Church, but it was a popular idea at one point in the Church's history.

What's limbo all about? Because the Church emphasizes how important it is to baptize infants, at one time in the past some theologians suggested that babies who died without baptism didn't experience God's love in heaven. Instead, they had a neutral experience—no punishment, but no great reward either.

What does the Church teach today about unbaptized children who die? It teaches that God's love and salvation is theirs—100%. They can experience God's love every bit as much as the rest of us. In other words, *there is no limbo*.

After all this talk about hell and limbo, what I want to leave you with is this: Right now, in each and every moment and at the moment of our death, God is trying mightily to reach us with his love. As Jesus showed us on the cross, God's arms are open to receive us. We have only to open our own arms in return. Thank you.

