

Hell for 75 cents

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Catholic News Service

When I was a young woman, I went to the grocery store with my mom in the farm town where I grew up.

It was before the days of computerized cash registers that automatically revealed the amount of change due. You needed some rudimentary math skills back then to work at a store.

My mom was a bookkeeper for a lumber company and adding and subtracting were second nature. So when the clerk gave her the change, she noted she'd been given 75 cents too much and handed back the extra.

I don't remember what I said as we walked to the car, but I probably remarked on her honesty.

"Well," said my mom, "I don't want to go to hell for 75 cents."

That stopped me in my tracks.

"Do you believe God would send you to hell for 75 cents?" I asked.

She replied that she did, but I had a sense that my question had given her pause. Did she really believe in a God of such vengeance? A God waiting to punish brutally for a small infraction? I don't think she really did, and my question probably stirred some reflection in her on just who her God was.

That question — who is God for me? — is probably our life's primary question.

Recently, I worked with a journal that asked me to describe the God of my childhood and youth. Then, I was to describe God as I see him as an adult.

Not surprisingly, the God of my childhood reflected my upbringing's view of a judgmental, punishing God. This is often how God was presented in catechesis a few

decades ago. “Judge,” “stern taskmaster,” — those were some of the words I wrote in the journal.

As an adult, I use the word “mystery” to describe God. In theology classes I’ve taken, I’ve heard it repeated: Our spirituality is how we walk with mystery.

To veer too far from accepting God’s mystery is to create my own image of God, to hang onto something I’ve come to think of as a “God in a box” mentality, full of my own certainties. A writer remarked recently, only half-jokingly, that we know we’ve created God in our own image when God hates the same people we do.

In my adult reflection, I described God with words like “inclusive,” “expansive,” “harder to pin down and define than when I was a child.” Well, I certainly hope I haven’t tried to pin God down lately. Instead, I use words like invitation and grace. I long to be ready to be surprised by grace and intimacy with the One who invites me.

As Pope Francis has told us, God’s name is mercy. And as Scripture defines God: God is love.

My mother taught me most of what I know about love, and I believe that deep down love is how she experienced God.

But back then, we too often saw God, like St. Peter at heaven’s gate, holding an all-important ledger with figures as rigid and unbending as those my mother kept in her ledger at the lumber company.

Nevertheless, I remain challenged by her comment. It reminded me of the Jewish phrase that was used to describe Oskar Schindler, the man who saved more than 1,000 Jewish workers from extermination during World War II.

“He who saves one life saves the world entire,” goes the maxim.

We all know that one who can be trusted in small things is the one who can be trusted in large. Perhaps she who is honest in small sums saves the world’s integrity, piece by piece.

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