

“Hell: When Love Fails”

Luke 16:19-31

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October 18, 2020

When I was a minister in Waterloo, Iowa, Kitty Ott—a Southern “grand dame” of Old First who went home to be with Jesus last year--would often say to me, “David, don’t ever be afraid to give us a little hell from time to time.” Well that might have been easy for a former Baptist from Alabama to say, but for a Presbyterian from New Jersey, “hell” is not something I like to dwell on, much less PREACH about. You see, I like to think of myself more as a “grace” preacher, that is, as someone who expounds more upon the forgiveness and love we receive through Jesus Christ rather than adding to the guilt and judgment people ALREADY experience. Yet there was a time, early on in my Christian life, when I, like so many young converts to the faith, was a fire-breathing, tent-shaking, holy-roller. I secretly prided myself in being able to discern those who were "saved" and going to heaven, and those who were "lost," destined for perdition. With my literal interpretation of the Bible, my image of hell could have come straight out of the medieval paintings of Hieronymous Bosch or even Jonathan Edwards’ famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” I was convinced that hell’s depiction as a lake of fire was an ACTUAL PLACE- a nether realm filled with weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth presided over by a most fearsome deity.

Well over time, I came to regard such a view of this vital Christian doctrine as a gross caricature. In the same way that no one knows what HEAVEN will look like or where it will be, only that it typifies the perfect ideal, the highest dreams and aspirations of the human soul, so we might say that HELL serves as the embodiment of humanity's worst fears and nightmares. Where HEAVEN begins and ends with a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, HELL is the consequence of our decision to SEPARATE ourselves from God and all the resources of his love and forgiveness. It is life without faith, life without love, life without hope, and life without a conscience. Hence, rather than a particular PLACE people are consigned to AFTER THEY DIE, I believe hell is ACTUALLY a state of MIND AND HEART AND SOUL based upon our rejection of God’s grace IN THE HERE AND NOW.

Last week, I spoke of how the doctrine of HEAVEN evolved over many centuries and the same may be said for the doctrine of HELL. Years ago, I took a trip to Israel that included three days of touring the old walled city of Jerusalem. Just outside one of its gates is a steep green valley with a manicured lawn and a band shell where people come from all over to hear concerts and plays performed. However, it was not ALWAYS so neat and idyllic. This is the Hinnom Valley from which you get the word "Gehenna," translated "hell" in our Bibles. The Hinnom Valley or "Gehenna" was originally where worship was paid to the pagan god Molech, the god of the Ammonites. Central to their worship was human sacrifice where persons, especially infants, were cast into the fire as an offering for him. Several Israelite kings bowed their hearts to Molech, sacrificing even their own children and those of their people there. After Josiah became king, however, the worship stopped and it became a fiery pit where Jerusalem's garbage was burned- the stench of which often filled the city. Thus, the idea of hell as a lake of fire was first derived from this valley and it has dominated the popular imagination ever since.

Although we like to think of Jesus as the ULTIMATE proponent and exemplar of mercy and grace, he OFTEN spoke on the dangers of being “cast into hell.” He excoriated the Pharisees whom he called serpents and a brood of vipers who would not escape the sentence of hell. He exhorted his followers to not fear those who kill the body and not the soul, but rather to “fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” He warned them to beware of anything that might come between themselves and their commitment to God, saying that if their hands or feet would cause them to stumble, it would be far better for them to go through life crippled or lame than to keep all their extremities and be cast into eternal fire. However, it should be noted that any of his references to hell and teachings on the subject were never intended to define for us WHAT hell is, WHERE hell is, or WHAT IT WOULD LOOK LIKE. Rather, they WERE intended to warn us that there is a cost to disregarding God’s will while neglecting our fellow human beings, ESPECIALLY those who are lesser and much weaker than ourselves. In other words, Jesus’s words were meant to underscore the truth that human actions can and DO carry eternal consequences.

This lesson is PARTICULARLY evident in this morning’s parable on Lazarus and the Rich Man. As Barbara Lundblad, Professor of Preaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, says of this story:

Jesus didn’t tell this parable to scare the HELL out of us. Jesus told this parable to change the way we are living THIS side of heaven. We’re feasting sumptuously and Lazarus is still hungry. Of course, there isn’t only one man named Lazarus; there are millions of men, women, and children who long for even a crumb from our tables. Many of them are far beyond our gates or our front doors—we will never even know their names.... There is a great chasm between us and the millions of people who are starving.

The parable opens by introducing us to a rich man who dressed in nothing but the fanciest clothes and ate the finest foods. However, each day at the gate of his palatial estate, a poor man--probably a leper--was dumped there by his family to beg for crumbs (the original Greek implies that he was flung there by them with contempt and roughness). He was so hungry that he was willing to eat the bits of food that fell from the rich man’s table, scraps that were usually intended for the dogs. Thus, the contrast between these two figures could not have been any greater.

But we are immediately confronted with an interesting paradox for where we would expect the rich man--by virtue of all his wealth and status--to have a name, and the leper--due to of his poor and wretched condition--NOT to have one, the OPPOSITE is in fact the case- the poor man is given the name “Lazarus” meaning “God is my help” while the other is anonymous--one simply referred to as a “rich man.” Well Jesus once again shows how he is no respecter of persons, having no more regard for persons of wealth and privilege and power and influence than he has for anybody else. For the poor and maimed and marginalized of Israel regardless of whether they were male or female, young or old, Jew or gentile, he confers an honor and dignity upon them that others would refuse them- he gives them a NAME and what’s MORE he KNOWS what each name is.

Continuing, we are told that in time, both men died, but where Lazarus was escorted to heaven to be at Abraham’s side, the rich man ends up in the fires of Gehenna. What’s more, he

is able to see Lazarus- no longer poor and hungry and covered with sores but healthy and joyful. Still thinking that he is the master and Lazarus his slave, he calls out to Father Abraham and implores that he would send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and to cool his tongue. Abraham responds that in life, he possessed everything while Lazarus had nothing. Now the roles are reversed so that for all eternity Lazarus will be comforted while he, the rich man, will feel what it is that Lazarus had suffered- only MORE so. The rich man had become poor while the poor man was now rich!

The judgment was that Lazarus was his brother and yet he had DENIED their brotherhood; he had REJECTED their common humanity. The rich man was punished, not because he was rich but because with his wealth, he had the opportunity to do something about Lazarus's condition and yet he did NOTHING about it. He was a steward over his resources for the betterment of others yet he chose to HOARD it for himself and his own enjoyment instead. As one commentator has so powerfully put it:

The tragedy is not that he harmed Lazarus, but that he ignored him. He did not see the crippled legs; he did not smell the festering sores; he did not feel the gnawing hunger; he did not hear the agonizing cry. Cold and callous to abject hunger and disease and indignity, he kept his distance and remained insensitive to this human being in need. He would not cross the chasm between his table and his gate; now he cannot cross the chasm between the land of fire and the land of fountains. Though everyday he passed by Lazarus lying at his gate, he did not really see a man hungry and hurting and longing. He did not feel compassion toward him and thus showed no concern for him. He did not care. He did not love. So the rich became poor and the poor rich.

Before Dr. Albert Schweitzer became a celebrated medical missionary to one of the poorest areas on the African continent, he was already regarded as one of the premier organists and interpreters of Bach in Europe as well as a brilliant theologian. One day in 1905, he heard a sermon preached on this morning's lesson. It was then he realized his life's TRUE calling was not in music or theology but in MEDICINE and so he abandoned his comfortable life in Strasbourg to devote the rest of his life to helping the poor and destitute among the jungles of French Equatorial Africa. Such selfless devotion would eventually win him the Nobel Peace Prize. In his autobiography, he wrote how his heart had been challenged and then changed by this parable:

I had read about the physical miseries of the natives in the virgin forests; I had heard about them from missionaries, and the more I thought about it the stranger it seemed to me that we Europeans trouble ourselves so little about the great humanitarian task which offers itself to us in far-off lands. The parable of Lazarus and the rich man seemed to me to have been spoken directly to us! We are that rich man, for, through the advances of medical science, we now know a great deal about disease and pain, and have innumerable means of fighting them: yet we take as a matter of course the incalculable advantages which this new wealth gives us! Out there in the colonies, however, sits wretched Lazarus, the colored folk, who suffers from illness and pain just as much as we do, nay, much MORE, and has absolutely no means of fighting them. And just as the RICH MAN sinned against the poor man at his gate because for want of thought he never put himself in his place and let his heart and conscience tell him what he ought to do, so do WE sin against the poor man at OUR gate.

Dr. Schweitzer was right- we ARE that rich man described in this parable! Each of us is rich in our own way and like him, we each have countless opportunities to reach out to the Lazaruses right outside our front doorstep. That help begins by not simply throwing them a few coins and demonstrating how charitable we can be. Rather, it is by first acknowledging them as one of us, by recognizing them as our equals- as our own brothers and sisters to whom God has given us a responsibility for. This story is every bit pointed directly to us and our OWN hearts just as it was to the Pharisees of Jesus's day.

I have to confess that in light of everything I've said, "hell" still remains a great mystery to me as it is to so many others. What I DO know, however, is that there is constant evidence of hell's existence everywhere around us, that our inhumanity towards those weaker and less fortunate than ourselves cannot be denied. Two months ago, the world commemorated the seventy-fifth anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Last year, the National Geographic channel showed pictures of the bombs aftermath as well as interviewed several survivors who are still alive even after all these years. The destruction and loss of life was indescribable with one Japanese woman saying, "If there is a hell, that was it." I think of the families who have tried to rebuild in the aftermath of one hurricane after another with all the flooding that followed on our southern shores, the tornadoes that have ravaged the central portions of our nation, and the devastating fires that have reduced to ash so much of our beautiful West and I have no doubt that they feel they have "lived through hell." Lamented one Louisianan last week after returning home in the wake of that region's latest hurricane, "It looked like someone had dropped a bomb on Lake Charles!"

But we don't need dramatic pictures of death and destruction to prove what hell on earth looks like. We need look no further than our OWN HEARTS- to our own selfishness and pride, to our own hatreds and bitterness and jealousies to see the very BEGINNINGS of hell. The writer A.J. Cronin perhaps summed it up best when he wrote in his novel *The Keys of the Kingdom* that hell "is the place where one has ceased to hope." It is to lose all hope and suffer from a conscience that knows no forgiveness. And if that's the case, then perhaps many of us don't have to look any further than at that face that stares back at us in the mirror each morning after we get out of bed to be reminded that there IS a hell and what it CAN look like.

Of course, the most TRAGIC consequence of "living in hell" is to never experience the peace and security one finds in loving others and BEING loved in return. When Gloria Vanderbilt died last year at the ripe old age of 95, her obituary remarked that she was more remembered today for the jeans she designed and sold throughout the 1970's and 80's than the fact that during the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression, she was the most famous little girl in America NOT named Shirley Temple. Gloria was frequently referred to by the press as the "poor little rich girl" and for good reason. You see, she was the great-great-granddaughter of Cornelius Vanderbilt with a multi-million dollar trust fund she could not touch until her 21st birthday. Her alcoholic father died when she was a baby and her mother left her with a nanny while she partied across Europe, living off her daughter's money for many years. When Gloria was 10, her mother and her wealthy aunt, Gertrude, sued each other in the era's most sensational child-custody case. For 13 weeks in 1934, the ensuing legal battle in New York's highest court riveted and scandalized the nation as they learned of her mother's greed, debauchery and cold indifference towards her. Her aunt eventually won custody but it left that little girl traumatized

by the experience. Gloria later admitted that her aunt had once told her--but ONLY ONCE AND NEVER AGAIN--that she loved her.

Growing up in her aunt's mansions in New York City and on Long Island, with servants, chauffeurs, lawyers, tutors, private schools and trips abroad, Ms. Vanderbilt searched for fulfillment as an artist, a fashion model, a poet, a playwright and an actress of stage, screen and television. She conducted numerous affairs in her search for love, including with Errol Flynn, Frank Sinatra, Gene Kelly, Howard Hughes and Marlon Brando. She married four times, divorcing three of them- one of whom was a mobster who beat her and another, the conductor Leopold Stokowski, who was 42 years older and preoccupied with his own career. She had four children, one of whom is CNN's news anchor Anderson Cooper. However, ANOTHER son jumped from the 14th floor of her Manhattan penthouse as she tried to stop him. He was only 23.

In 1985, Gloria wrote a memoir she entitled *Once Upon a Time: A True Story*; it was about her early years growing up. In a review for *The New York Times*, Barbara Harrison called the book "immensely sad," noting that the author had never been poor and yet, in a way, she was "as impoverished as any child in any mean slum." Wrote Ms. Harrison, "She never enjoyed the greatest privilege of all — that of being poised and grounded in maternal love...Her book is a haunting lament for that primal love, a cry of the heart that speaks to the child in all of us." Thus the life of Gloria Vanderbilt serves as a morality tale of how we can be handed every possible material advantage and yet lack what's TRULY important, like the peace and security that comes with unconditional love and acceptance. As we can see, WITHOUT such an assurance, life can devolve into a living hell.

Well the GOOD news is that people DON'T have to remain in hell forever, that there is yet ANOTHER way. This comes when we introduce them to the love and the joy, the peace and the hope we OURSELVES have found through Jesus Christ. As Christ HIMSELF became the bridge between heaven and hell for US, so does he promise to do so for THEM- offering them NEW life and a NEW beginning where before there was only guilt and despair. He stands at the doorway to our hearts RIGHT NOW, offering us his personal presence, extending to us his bottomless love, promising to accompany us every step along life's journey, pledging to never leave or forsake us REGARDLESS of what may lie ahead. Thus, THEY can discover the same hope WE did and know that the same peace and love and joy WE now experience may be theirs AFTER ALL! Now wouldn't THAT be heaven. Let us pray...

Our Heavenly Father, help us to no longer think of hell as just a place of future punishment and torment but rather a place of our own making, a place of our own choosing- hell, right here and right now. Help us to be faithful witnesses to the "good news" that people do not have to remain in their hells forever, WHATEVER that may be to them. Even as you delivered US from ourselves and transferred US to the light and love of your glorious presence, so you promise to do the same for THEM- if only they would ask. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.