

Sunday September 29th, 2019
Pentecost 16

PRAYER: O God, you promised to protect those who know your name! You promised to answer those who call upon you; Lord, we call upon you! You promised to deliver those who love you; Lord, we love you! Pour out your spirit, that we might know that you are in our midst-that you are our God, and shall not be moved! Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: Brothers and sisters, fight the good fight of faith. Fight, at righteousness, godliness, love, and gentleness. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. And Christ, who alone can keep you from falling will deliver you blameless before the throne of God. In Christ, we are forgiven. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: “O people of all nations of the earth, ascribe great strength and glory to His name! Yes, ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name! Bring an offering and come before him.” (1 Chronicles 16:28 29)

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Loving, Eternal God, you see all things. Nothing is hiding from your gaze. Some things you see bring you great joy, like the wonder and beauty of your creation, or the expressions of love and compassion extended in your name. Unfortunately, there are also things you see which break your heart, such as how we treat the “least of our brothers and sisters” who are at our very doors.

How can we your creation, created in your image be so blind to what is happening around us. Actually, in all honesty, we know the needs and cares of our neighbours but we choose to turn a blind eye. We tell ourselves that if we pretend injustice, poverty and social ills are not there that somehow wipes them from the earth. But we know this is not true. You told your disciples many years ago that we would always have the poor among us, and we know these words to be true.

Forgive our stepping over, or even stepping on the poor, in our climb up the economic ladder. Deliver us from the delusion that our scraps are demonstrations of generosity. Keep us, we pray, from seeing others, no matter their economic status as anything but your children. That we are all part of the family.

Forgive us the pain we have caused to others, by degrading looks, and hushed comments that label others. Forgive us withholding even simple gestures of kindness, to those who have experienced so little kindness. Make us ready, willing, and able to build relationships with our neighbours who have little to no friendship. Help us to restore the dignity of all persons by accepting and honouring whatever contribution they can make to the larger community.

Make us bold, especially in this election cycle, to champion the cause of those left behind, or who have no voice. Make your priorities our priorities. Make us builders of housing, clothiers of the naked, feeders of the hungry, healers of the sick, and quenchers of thirst.

Make us a grateful people for those who do often thankless work to better our lives; especially when they make minimum wages. Remind us to say thank you to those hard-working men and women, who remain on their feet for hours just to serve us.

Thank you, dear God, for agencies and churches who work hard to gather resources and to serve those who have so little. Bless with an abundance of your bounty and grace, the Caring Cupboard, First Serving and Church out serving, plus many others.

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Thank you for the volunteers who give of their time and hearts to make a difference in so many lives. May they find great joy and fulfillment in easing the suffering of others.

BENEDICTION: O people of God, aim at righteousness, and shun iniquity; aim at steadfastness, and shun disloyalty; aim at gentleness, and shun cruelty; aim at faithfulness, and shun hypocrisy; but most of all, aim at love, and sin no one. Amen.

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Luke 16:19-31

“Having the Ultimate in Bad Days!”

The apocryphal story goes that there was a man who died and because of his great faith in God was admitted into heaven. After what appeared to the man to be a considerable amount of time, the man had become somewhat unsettled in his experience of heaven. Don't get me wrong, the man really loved being there but he began to wonder how the other half were fairing in, you know, “other place”.

So, summoning up his courage he approached Saint Peter and made a very unusual request. “Excuse me, Saint Peter; I was wondering if I might just have a look at what it is like in the other place?” “The other place; you don't mean down there?” Peter replied. “Well, actually that is exactly what I am asking” the man said. “This is very unusual. No one has ever voluntarily wanted to see, you know where” Peter said with some noticeable concern in his voice.

“I'm going to have to check on this for you and get back to you.” Peter offered and then they parted company. It wasn't long until Peter sought the man out and said the following. “It was difficult to arrange but you can have your look. Here is how it will work. You will descend in that golden elevator over there and when you arrive the doors will open. Now, this is very important; whatever you do, don't get off the elevator. If you do the doors will close and you will be trapped down there for eternity.”

“I understand”, said the man and with that he walked into the elevator and he began to descend to the unholy depths of “you know where”. After a while the man returned to the safety of heaven and Peter was there to greet him. “Well, what did you think?” Peter asked. “Well, it wasn't at all what I expected. I was always told it was a place of fire, brimstone and incredible heat, but when the doors opened the whole place was frozen over, with ice and snow and everyone was shivering.”

“Oh dear” Peter said, “That can only mean one thing. The Leafs finally won the cup.” We like to make fun of things that scare us, and I'm not talking about the Leafs' inability to win Lord Stanley's cup. Perhaps humour lessens the emotional pain that would well up in us if we dwelt on things that make us squirm. This is no less so then with any talk about “the other place” of as we call it, Hell.

Hell is a subject we would rather not talk about at all, unless of course we can think of funny images of red devils holding pitch forks or make fun through jokes. Well, today's gospel lesson is anything but funny. In fact, at face value, it is quite terrifying. This particular parable is perhaps the most unusual one Jesus ever shared with his audience. For the first and only time, Jesus names a character in his story; Lazarus.

Not the same Lazarus who was Mary and Martha's brother, and who Jesus will eventually raise from the dead in John chapter 11. Some commentators have gone so far as to even suggest that because Jesus uses a name here that perhaps this was a true story. Personally, I think that is going too far.

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The images, the setting, and the interchange between the characters are designed to shake us up and to recall us to what is the essential truth of our existence. That it is not enough to simply claim you are a child of Abraham, you must live like one.

Child of Abraham; now that phrase may confuse you. Perhaps it is not what you expected me to say, but let me unpack it for you. Remember that this story falls at the end of a chapter when Jesus is teaching and debating with Pharisees. Those same Pharisees, we learned last week, love their money and those are the same Pharisees who believed they were special in the eyes of God because they were “sons of Abraham”.

The phrase “Sons of Abraham” is very significant. The religious elite in Jesus’ day took an arrogant pride in their Jewish heritage because in their own eyes they were pious and honoured by God. Remember what happens in Luke chapter 19? Jesus encounters Zacchaeus, and even goes to eat at this Tax Collector’s home. The Pharisees grumble and make their usual accusation that Jesus loves to fraternize with sinners.

In response Jesus says of Zacchaeus, “Salvation has come to this house because this man has shown himself to be a Son of Abraham.” Such a declaration, giving a notorious sinner like Zacchaeus the same status that the Pharisee’s claimed for themselves, caused quite a stir and just fueled the anger the Pharisees felt for Jesus. An anger that had been building for some time, and was started by parables like the one we read today.

The story goes that there was a certain rich man, who enjoyed the very best of life and yet lived under a false impression. He too believed that he was a true child of Abraham and I suspect that he probably believed that because he was so wealthy, God was blessing him. I suspect he just thought the sun was shining just for him. While he was enjoying his choice food and wine, a beggar, whom Jesus refers to as Lazarus, was lying at his door.

This poor man’s existence was literally hell on earth. He was starving, relying on whatever scraps he could gain from the rich man’s table. Lazarus was also quite sick and he was in such physical misery that he hadn’t the strength to fight off dogs that came and licked his sores. Jesus is clearly letting his hearers know that Lazarus was not a hidden victim.

He was literally lying on this rich man’s front step. You couldn’t enter or leave this mansion without practically tripping over Lazarus. Despite his obvious need though, Lazarus was ignored; even when his very life was threatened by disease and starvation. The contrast between poverty and extravagant wealth are very clear to see in this parable and was the obvious intention of Jesus.

We read on in the parable, and learn that both men ended up dying. The point of the parable is dramatically demonstrated after their deaths because their roles were reversed. Lazarus who lived a hellish existence on earth is whisked away into heaven, to the very embrace of Abraham, the father of Jewish faith. The rich man is whisked away to the “place of the dead”, or hell, where he lived in torment. Jesus’ audience was very likely shocked by this turn of events.

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I am sure that they assumed that because this wealthy man had such a rich life that everything, he did, was right with God. Lazarus on the other hand must have really offended God to be living the way he was. This is the same argument we read about in the book of Job which God dismisses as rubbish. The switching of fortunes in the afterlife is in Jesus' heart a matter of justice.

In fact, Abraham makes this critical point in the story in verse 25. "Son, remember that during your lifetime you had everything you wanted, and Lazarus had nothing. So now he is here being comforted, and you are in anguish." Notice the use of the word "son" referring to the title "Son of Abraham". The horror of the story is revealed in the rich man's existence in "the place of the dead". An existence that is so bad that he longs for just a drop of cool water to cool the tip of his tongue.

However, even this simple act of mercy is impossible because of the great chasm that separates heaven and hell. There is no relief for the rich man, no comfort now in hell as there was no relief or comfort for Lazarus when he languished on the front steps of the rich man's home. All that wealth, power, and influence are now worthless. The rich man stored up treasures on earth but had no treasure in heaven.

Out of a sense of urgency, the tormented man in the "place of the dead" or as it literally is called "Hades", begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers. Abraham dismisses the request by stating that the five remaining brothers have Moses and the prophets to warn them, and they can read their writings any time they wish. Then the man begs Abraham to send someone back from the dead to warn them.

Abraham replies, "If they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen even if someone rises from the dead." Jesus' point is clear. Those who listened to him that day, like the Pharisees, had all the writings of the prophets to warn them that their declared faith required them to address the hellish existence of people on earth. It is the highest level of hypocrisy to claim allegiance to God, and behave like you have never heard one single word about how he wants us to live.

It is the same point Jesus makes in Matthew 25 in the parable of the "Sheep and the Goats". The sheep go to paradise because they cared for those who were hungry, thirsty, naked, lonely, in prison etc. The goats go Hades to live in torment because they haven't cared for the "least of Jesus' brothers and sisters". Jesus is saying that God has made it abundantly clear in his word, that His true children live out the covenant that God made with Abraham.

Live it out by relieving the hell people are living in right now, on this earth. Hear the words in Matthew 7 beginning at verse 21, *"Not all people who sound religious are really godly. They may refer to me as 'Lord,' but they won't enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The decisive issue is whether they obey my Father in heaven. On judgment day many will tell me, 'Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Go away; the things you did were unauthorized."*

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The point is, if we really were children of Abraham, followers of Christ, or children of God, then people who are living like Lazarus could count on us to ease their situation. The word of God has given us ample warning and even when Jesus rose from the dead and came back to warn us, many would not listen. So, I go back to my original observation that we often use humour to mask our fear and lessen the painful reality of our existence.

Hades, Hell or “the place of the dead”, are realities that we cannot easily dismiss with humour. Nor can we dismiss that our faith, as it is lived out, reveals the true level of our relationship to God. As with last week’s message, today’s parable speaks loudly to the fact that we are going to be held account for: where our true riches are and how we have invested ourselves and our wealth.

In one of the greatest demonstrations in irony I have ever heard about comes from a research study done by Darley and Batson at Princeton in 1973. Darley and Batson took a group of theological students (future ministers and missionaries and biblical scholars) and told them they were to go across campus to deliver a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan.

As part of their research, some of the students were told that they were late and needed to make haste to get to their appointment on time. Along the route the students would take to make their appointment, Darley and Batson had hired an actor to play the role of a victim who was coughing and in obvious pain. The actor was clearly noticeable and in the direct path of the student.

The study found that ninety percent of the students, who thought they were late from Princeton Theological Seminary of all places, completely ignored the suffering person in their haste to make it across the campus. As the study reports ironically, “Indeed, on several occasions, a seminary student going to give his talk on the parable on the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the victim as he hurried away.”

This little research study coincides with what Jesus is trying to say. Even if you believe you are doing your religious service like studying the bible, tithing, praying, making your sacrifices, that does not excuse you from caring for the people living a hellish existence on your doorstep. The bible is full of references that make this very point. John wrote, “But if one of you has enough money to live well, and sees his brother or sister in need and refuses to help-how can God’s love be in that person?” (1 John 3:17)

How indeed? God hates hypocrisy. This whole section in the gospel of Luke is full of parables designed to challenge among other things, hypocrisy. Saying we are “Children of God” when our lives reveal other allegiances. The consequence of a life lived like this are truly frightening and no amount of humour can diminish this fact. There is a “place of the dead”, Hades, or as we like to call it, Hell.

Whether or not we end up in that terrible place is really a matter of how sincere and life altering our faith truly is.

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If we continue to step over or around those like Lazarus, then come judgment day Christ will look at us and say that he never knew us. He will say we are strangers to him because we have not sought to be like him. And surely it will be the ultimate in bad days to have Jesus look at us and not recognize us as one of his own.

And it is not like we didn't know this. We have the scriptures, the words of the prophets, and Jesus and the disciples to show us the way. And unlike in the parable we did have someone come back from the dead to call us to a different approach to life. Jesus is our resurrected Lord but have we listened to him and have we sought by his strength and wisdom to live out his teaching in our homes, our neighbourhoods, our places of work and even in this church? I sure hope we have, because the alternative is nothing to laugh at.