

"Whatever Became of Hell?"

Matthew 13:47-50

July 24, 2011

6th Sunday After Pentecost

Whatever became of hell? Have you noticed that you don't hear much about it any more?

What used to be a staple of good old fashioned "fire and brimstone" sermons is often missing from modern day sermons. You rarely hear anything about hell unless it's being used as a swear word.

Why is this? It's as if Christians are offended by the notion of hell and want to keep quiet about it so that they don't offend anyone else or scare anyone off with talk about hell.

Yet Jesus clearly believed in and clearly taught about hell. Our text for today is one of His parables which closes with some pretty clear and graphic language about the reality of hell. He says, "The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

It is no wonder that hell is not popular to talk about these days. Non-Christians have always denied the existence of hell and have used the teaching of hell as a basis for criticizing the validity of the Christian faith. "What kind of God would send people to hell?", they say.

For many years, liberal mainline Christian denominations have, for all intents and purposes, denied hell. Although they may admit the reality of hell, their liberal theology will deny that anyone actually goes to hell. "What kind of people would actually be bad enough to be in hell?", they say.

Now comes a third group which denies hell: trendy young Christians in the emergent church movement. These are the people who quite popular in Christianity today. They are writing the best selling books and leading the seminars which are all the rage. They cast their denial in doubt. "Who can say that anyone is in hell? Will millions of people really burn in hell? How can we know?"

What is being denied? Many deny THAT hell exists at all. Non-Christians and even some who call themselves Christians will say, "If God is a loving God, then I just can't believe there a place like hell." We all would like a God who is all "sweetness and light"; who is friendly, not judgmental; who

guides us, but does not condemn us; who rewards us because we are good and does not punish us because we are bad.

Many deny WHAT hell is according to the Bible. It is, as our text says, like a fiery furnace where, Jesus says elsewhere, “the fire never goes out.” (Mark 9:43) Jesus says to those going to hell, “‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’... Then they will go away to eternal punishment.” (Matthew 25:41,46) It is an eternal fire which gives eternal punishment. The agony of hell (which Jesus teaches about in his story about the rich man and Lazarus) is so horrible that it will echo with constant weeping and gnashing of teeth..

Many deny WHO will go to hell. They just can’t imagine anyone so evil that they would end up in hell. Nor can they imagine that basically good people would end up in hell simply because they were of the wrong religion. Rob Bell is pastor of the popular Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, MI and has just written a controversial book on the topic entitled, *“Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived.”* Although not actually denying the existence of hell, he says that we can’t be sure who is in hell. We can’t say that it is eternal. And we can’t say that there wouldn’t be a second chance for people in hell. He says that God’s love is so strong that it will win eventually out. God’s love will melt away all people’s resistance and so bring them to heaven, even if the conversion is after death. Some joke that he has merely created a “protestant purgatory” where anyone eventually gets in. Others say that he teaches universalism – the belief that all people will be saved. He is sufficiently vague so as to make one wonder which is true.

Some of you may think, “What’s the big deal about hell?” Why is it so important? Why can’t we just talk about God’s love and do away with the ‘hell talk’? The “hell talk” only offends people and drives them away. However, as Bible-believing Christians, we are not given the option of denying hell. It is a necessity.

First of all, to deny hell and all of its horror is to deny the clear Word of God. It is to reject our Lord Jesus Christ and all that He taught on this subject. We cannot do this.

Secondly, to deny hell and its purpose is to underestimate the magnitude and deny the seriousness of sin. It is to misunderstand the holiness of God. In our pride, we'd like to think that our sin is nothing more than a few mistakes – perhaps a couple of character flaws – which God can simply overlook or dismiss without much trouble. But sin is more than a few bad actions. Sin is our nature. It is who we are when we come into this world. It is not merely doing bad actions which God forbids. It is failing to do all the good which God commands. God is holy which means He has absolutely no sin nor can He tolerate any sin whatsoever. This absolute “zero tolerance” policy for any sin combined with our sinful nature and all of the sin which we produce on a daily basis shows the need for a place like hell.

If you want to truly get rid of sin and evil (and God does), then there has to be a place to send it. Originally created only to quarantine Satan and the other evil angels who rebelled against God (Matthew 25:41), hell was opened to human beings when we joined Satan and his rebellion.

There is great danger in denying hell. If we deny hell, why not deny heaven as well? The only way we know anything about the great goodness of heaven is from the same book which tells us about the horror of hell. If we can't be sure of hell, can we be sure of heaven?

If we deny the absolute justice of God, will we deny His mercy as well? If we claim that all the things the Bible says about God's condemnation and punishment of sinners is false, can we believe that what the Bible says about God's salvation and blessing of His people is true? If we think that God will ignore His holiness and justice, what is to stop Him from also ignoring His mercy and grace?

When someone says, “I can't believe that God would send anyone to a place like hell.”, perhaps the real sentiment expressed by the speaker is, “I don't want to believe that God would condemn someone like me to hell.” What is spoken is framed in general terms, but it is really about me and my fear of hell.

Do we have reason to fear hell? It sounds like we should, given the fact that we are so sinful and God is so holy. By that standard, everyone should fear hell. Fear is the reason Scripture

teaches of hell. It's like the reason for warning labels on cigarettes. Horrible consequences (cancer and death) are warned of for the continued behavior of smoking in the hopes that such behavior will be stopped. The horrible consequences of sin (death and hell) are warned of for the continued behavior of sin in the hopes that such behavior will be stopped.

The trouble is: we can't stop that behavior. We can't obey God's Law perfectly. We can't avoid all the bad He forbids. We can't do all the good that He requires. Therefore, God sent Jesus to be our substitute. Jesus obeyed God's Law perfectly as our substitute. His obedience and His holiness are credited to us. Jesus endured the wrath of God and God's punishment for sin – all of it including death and the torment of hell – when He hung on the cross. That sacrifice is counted for our sin.

Whenever something important and valuable is sent or given, a confirmation notice is sent to prove this. We have that, as well. After dying, Jesus descended into hell (as we confess in the Creed), not to suffer there but to proclaim His victory over it. Then, Jesus rose from the dead, not to show off, but to proclaim His victory over it. No longer would death be able to hold His people. No longer would hell be their destination. They would live forever with Him in Paradise. Salvation had been confirmed.

But who exactly are His people? Are His people limited to an elite group of morally or spiritually superior people? Not at all. That's what Jesus is teaching in the parable for today about fishing. The kingdom of God is extended to all. In our fishing today, we use a rod and reel to target a specific fish or kind of fish – rainbow trout, northern pike, and the like. In Biblical times, they used a net that was cast into the sea and would haul in all kinds of fish and sea life.

God's Kingdom functions in the same way. It doesn't target only a certain kind of people. The Gospel message of God's love, forgiveness, and everlasting life through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus, is cast out into all the world to all peoples again and again and again. It is to be made available to all people in all places of all time.

At the end of the day, a fish net is dragged in and the fish are separated by those who work for the fisherman. Good fish are put in a container. Worthless fish – those not suitable for eating – are thrown out.

In the same way, at the end of the age, angels will gather people together. Those who are evil and not suitable for the Kingdom are cast into the fiery furnace of hell, but the righteous will be separated out and brought to heaven.

Some worry that they are not righteous enough. But our salvation is not because of how good we are, but it is a gift received by faith in Jesus Christ and His holiness and sacrifice. Those who are in hell are not there because of lack of goodness but lack of faith. Our epistle reading for today reminds us that God has called us according to His purpose. He predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son. This took place in our baptisms. Our hope for everlasting life is not based on what we are doing now or in the future, but on what God has done in the past and promised for the future. St. Paul reminds us, “And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom He called he also justified, and those who he justified he also glorified.”

Can we walk away from that? Sure. But God and His love will never walk away from us. St. Paul’s confidence is ours, as well: “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Whatever became of hell? It’s still there as it has been. People are there and will be there as God has promised. This is real whether anyone – Christians or non-Christians – believe it or not. We need to be honest in admitting this and unafraid in proclaiming it. But our focus is on heaven. It’s still there, too. It’s God’s purpose for mankind and His earnest desire for mankind. So we continue to be part of the Kingdom of God in casting out the net of the Gospel to all people everywhere. And, trusting confidently in Jesus Christ and Him crucified, we eagerly await the net to be drawn in, to be separated from evil, and live in righteousness and holiness forever. Amen.

