

# "Keeping People Out of Hell"

Luke 16:19-31

September 26, 2010

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

The rich man in Jesus' parable in our Gospel reading today is one of the true "bad guys" in Scriptures. Not only is he rich, but he flaunts it in his manner of dress. He feasted sumptuously, something we would expect of a man of his means to do. However, he took merry-making to excess. Feasting is reserved for special occasions – a wedding or a visit of an honored person. This man feasted every day. He is out of control in his spending and use of possessions. He thought only of himself. He overlooked and refused to help the poor man – Lazarus – who sat at his gate who was ill and hungry.

Even when this man died and went to hell, he initially thought only of his own needs. He was in anguish in the flames and could only think how he needed water. When he saw Lazarus at Abraham's side in Paradise, he treated Lazarus as his personal servant who could be sent to do his bidding. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool my tongue."

When he saw that his needs would not be met, something in him changed. He began to think of others: his five brothers in his father's house. He knows they are in danger, probably because they are just like him. He knows that, if something doesn't change, they, too, will come to "this place of torment". He wants to keep them out of hell.

Aren't we the same? Don't we want to keep people – ourselves, our friends, family, loved ones, and all people – out of hell? Many people, including many Christians churches, either ignore the existence of hell or simply deny it. However, we take the Scriptures seriously when they speak of hell. We believe, as today's lesson describes, that hell is "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels," (Matthew 25:41) and to which God will send people who continue in the devil's rebellion

against God. Since we are all born in sin and in rebellion against God, how can anyone be kept out of hell which all so richly deserve?

The rich man has an idea. He says to Abraham, “Then I beg you, father, to send [Lazarus] to my father’s house – for I have five brothers – so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.” On the surface, this doesn’t seem bad. His brothers need to be warned. But that’s not exactly what the rich man means. When Abraham tells him that they already have the message – Moses and the Prophets – the rich man refuses that option. He says, “No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”

The rich man does not think that the Word of God is enough. He wants a miracle – something with a little pizzazz – to convince them. He wants Lazarus to rise from the dead so that, his brothers, having been warned by this man risen from the dead, will repent. He wants his brothers to be shocked into turning their lives around. He wants literally to scare the hell out of them and them out of hell.

Aren’t we often the same? We have the Word of God – the Gospel – the life-delivering message of Jesus’ perfect life in our place, Jesus’ sacrificial death for our sins, and Jesus’ triumphant resurrection from death and the grave for us. And we think that is not enough. We don’t trust the Word of God to do what it says it will. We want something more. Maybe we don’t want or expect someone to rise from the dead, but we would like some sort of spectacular thing to attract people’s attention so that they can escape hell.

It might be something negative to scare people. Preachers used to resort to “fire and brimstone” sermons to frighten people and get their attention, but people seem to be immune to such sermons and tend to ignore them. Recently, there was a series of books (later made into a movie) called “Left Behind” which talked about the rapture, the great tribulation, and the end of the world. I talked to someone who knew they presented false theology but said to me, “Maybe they’ll scare

someone into thinking about it.” Like the rich man, we hope to scare the hell out of people and people out of hell.

Or, more likely these days, we would like something that is positive to impress people. If only we had a huge church complex, thousands of worshipers, and a treasury full to overflowing, then people would change. They would be awed by our huge facility, be overwhelmed by the number of people here, impressed by the fine things money can buy, come to Christ in droves and thus escape hell.

There’s one major problem with looking to miraculous events and spectacular happenings to keep people out of hell: they don’t work. They can cause fear or attract attention but they cannot save from hell. As the Word of God says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith.” It is faith – not fear, not pizzaz, and not miracles – by which God’s grace saves us. And that faith comes only by hearing the Word of God. As the Bible says, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” (Rom. 10:17)

That’s what the rich man found out from Abraham. When the rich man proposed a “fire and brimstone” sermon from a dead man come back to life, Abraham said to him, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” Abraham is saying that people will not come to faith even if they should see someone rise from the dead. Really?

Jesus is talking about Himself here. He is the One who would die for the sin of the world and then rise from the dead. Did that produce faith that would save people from hell? No! When the reports came from the tomb that Jesus had risen from the dead, the disciples didn’t believe it. When they saw Jesus alive from the dead with their own eyes, they didn’t believe it. They had the promises from the Word of God. They had someone who had been dead standing alive before them. But they were scared and without faith.

Something changed that. On the first Easter evening, two disciples were traveling from Jerusalem to the small village of Emmaus. They were despondant over Jesus' death. They had the Word of God which prophesied Jesus' death and resurrection. They had the eye witness report of the women who had been at the tomb that morning and reported that Jesus was alive. Jesus appeared and walked with them on the road. Yet they still didn't believe. Then it says, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

The same thing happened later that evening when Jesus appeared to the apostles. They had heard Jesus' prediction that He would die and, three days later, be raised. They had Him standing before them. But they thought he was a ghost. Then it says, "Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures."

The same is true for us today. Merely having a Bible or the assertion that Jesus rose from the dead will not save anyone from hell. Our minds and spirits, blinded by sin, cannot accept the Biblical claims or be swayed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is only when our minds are opened and the Scriptures are explained to us that we come to faith and are saved from hell. We see Jesus doing that after His Easter resurrection. When Jesus ascended into heaven, He did not leave His disciples or generations that would follow without help. He promised, "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me." (John 15:26) It is the Holy Spirit who testifies about Jesus when His Word is read, taught, or preached. Through the working of that Holy Spirit in the Word, people will come to faith and escape hell.

This shapes and influences our witness as individuals and our ministry as the Body of Christ in this place. First of all, we are free from having to go looking for a miracle or depend upon some spectacular situation to bring people to faith. Those things will not cause faith so let us not give in to the worldly temptation to trust "pizazz" to convert people.

Secondly, we are free to trust the Word of God to bring people to God. God says,

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

This in no way means that we can sit back safely in our sanctuary and wait for people to discover the Word of God on their own. Nor can we turn this job over to the pastor or the Board of Elders to do. Each of us individually in our vocations and all of us together as the Church have the opportunity and responsibility to speak God's Word of law, sin, and condemnation, as well as God's Word of Gospel, forgiveness, and life, in whatever opportunities He provides.

Thirdly, we are free to simply speak, teach, and preach the Word of God to anyone and everyone. Nowhere does the Bible give us the responsibility to convert ourselves or other people. It simply says, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction." (2 Timothy 4:2)

Fourthly, we are free to trust God to do the work of converting, granting faith, and rescuing from hell. What a relief *that* is! Of course, things may not always go according to our plan and our time table in this whole process. We may see the work of the Holy Spirit in converting a person to faith or we may never see it. That should not worry us or bother us. The important thing is not WHO preached the Word but THAT a person is converted. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth who had seen a number of pastors go through, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." (1 Cor. 3:6-7)

So, if you are concerned about specific friends, family or loved ones going to hell or just the world in general, do not fear. Keep throwing the seed of the Word of God out there in different ways and in different times. Don't worry about jazzing it up. Don't worry about the results. Let the Holy Spirit take care of that. But be assured of this: when the Word of God is read, spoken, taught, or

preached and the Holy Spirit has the opportunity to work, people *will* be kept out of hell and brought into heaven. Amen.