

LIFE HELL & HOPE

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Somewhere in the accumulation of notable quotes I've read or heard but for which I cannot begin to cite a source, comes this gem. "Do you believe in infant baptism?" "Believe in it, man I've seen it!" I guess that's why they say, "seeing is believing".

Now this morning I'm not planning to talk about infant baptism – although it might be an easier and safer topic than what I've planned. I want to think with you this morning about "hell". Do you believe in hell? Perhaps we should borrow the answer from that anonymous quip, "believe in it, man I've seen it!"

We have seen hell in our world. We may approach it from different angles; may use different definitions, but we've seen it. We've seen it "in our world of incessant warfare and senseless killing, in the death of innocent children, in the alienation within families, in marital breakups (quoted from Martin Marty, The Christian Century 6/3/08, pg 24)". We've seen the children of Darfur reduced to eating dirt and the young adults of America spending their last dime on cocaine. War may be hell, but so too is poverty and addiction and dementia, and trying to survive after a natural disaster. We know. We've seen it. We can point to the signs that the world is "going to hell in a hand basket".

Or is that the hell we are talking about? Doesn't the church have a different definition? Doesn't our Christian faith put forth a different picture? Shouldn't we be talking instead about a raging fire where the weeds in Jesus' parable are burned to ashes – a fiery place located somewhere in the center of the earth inhabited by people who turned the wrong way at life's key intersection? The eternal dwelling place of people like Adolf Hitler and Bonnie & Clyde. And the woman who shrieks in that Toyota commercial.

So have we seen it – you and I?...or have we only imagined it?...or thought about it? Is it found in an actual situation – in a particular state of affairs?...or is it a place in a realm beyond planet earth? – A place we all hope to avoid!

Theologians' opinions are all over the lot; often more confusing than helpful but usually reflecting a mix of now and later. I like what Paul Griffiths of Duke says, "Hell is that despairing condition in which separation from God seems final and unending; in it there is no faith, no hope, no love – only the agony of abandonment." Separation from God – the agony of abandonment – it can be momentary or eternal. Is that an experience you have known? Or one you are constantly trying to avoid? Something that you have recognized in the faces of friends or strangers? Or something that awaits you when you die? Do you believe in hell? Have you seen it? Is it real for you?

I have to smile remembering a conversation with a parishioner about a dozen years ago. He approached me on a Sunday morning after most of the people had left the sanctuary. With deep seriousness he said he had read where attendance had been declining in many churches, and he was convinced

the solution was to talk more about hell. “You need to scare people”, he said. “Let them know that if they don’t get more involved in their church, they’ll go to hell. That’s the way to build up attendance”. (Actually I was told that what helped attendance in Florida in July was shorter sermons and air conditioning!)

I mention this story because I am convinced that over the years the church has said too much and too little about hell. Some of us would say that it has hardly even been mentioned – and we would be happy to keep it that way. On the other hand there have been elaborate attempts within some sectors of the church to describe it in detail; to depict hell as a physical flame-filled place (with or without attendants holding pitchforks!). The emphasis seems to be on dramatizing its horrible nature so that folks will do all they can to avoid winding up there – neither now nor later. Become a Christian – it’s your everlasting fire insurance policy!

So when someone asks in all seriousness, “do you believe in hell”, how do you respond? Do you feel your answer must be related to being convinced of the existence of a fiery pit in the after life? Or is it known, seen, reflected in the world in which we live? My own opinion is there may be a place. I do not know – and I trust I will never find out. But I can certainly affirm the horror of separation from God and the agony of abandonment at times in my life. Isn’t that what Jesus was experiencing when he cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Or what the residents of the 9th ward in New Orleans feel three years after Katrina?

What the Paul Griffiths definition of hell we shared earlier does is to open our thinking to the broader matter of separation from God. And focusing on that separation leads us into a two-pronged discussion. You see it is impossible to read the gospels without noticing Jesus concern, not only about our potential separation from God, but also his concern over our separation from our neighbors. In fact he seems to set the two sequentially. If you separate yourself from neighbors then by that action you also separate yourself from God. Or conversely, if you would be united to God you must first be united with your neighbors – indeed with the whole human community.

Do you remember Jesus’ story about the distinction between the sheep and the goats? To the sheep he says come and enter the kingdom of my father because you fed the hungry, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, visited the imprisoned, provided hospitality to the stranger. And those he sent away – the goats – were the ones who had not reached out to – had not connected with – their sisters and brothers.

Our solidarity with Jesus is formed through our involvement with proclaiming good news to the poor, setting the oppressed free, and seeking those who are lost. This is the antidote for the pain of separation from God. This is how we counteract the power of hell. We cannot ignore the anguish in the lives of those around us. We began by talking about the agony of abandonment – identifying that as the reality of hell. But do we really see? Or is our reference to “hell” vague? Are you able to identify times and places where God seemed to be absent? When you were left all alone?

I am not talking about the gloomy pessimism that seems to pervade American culture. “Think things are bad? Wait a few minutes and they are bound to get worse. If one shoe has dropped the other is certainly going to hit before you can turn around!” That’s not separation from God, that’s “having a bad day”! I have no particular data or statistics, but it seems to me that we have to be among the most anxious and fearful of generations. We are a culture that is continually on edge; stressed out; always with something to be worried about. Perhaps it is the result of 9-11 or perhaps it is related to more recent economic uncertainties. Maybe we have had it so good for so long that the thought of any kind of change – any alteration of our predictable patterns is greeted by high anxiety. Such worry is self-centered and petty. Abandonment is catastrophic!

So then what can we say about the hellish reality in the lives of others; in our own lives? How do we live as people of faith when staring into the darkness of God’s absence; when hell rears its head on every side? Let’s return to the parable that served as our scripture lesson for this morning; to the story of the wheat and the weeds.

In the parable those who were working in the wheat fields saw the weeds emerging. They knew they had put down good seed, but they didn’t know where the weeds had come from. Why is our wheat – our world – messed up – and how can it be fixed? Those are all natural questions. But when they take them to the landowner his instructions are only to be patient.

How can we be patient when every day we have to look at that field? And every day what we see is worse than the day before. The weeds continue to grow – big and ugly – in some places totally obscuring the wheat. Anger and frustration increase. The field is a horrible mess. It is hell out there. It is counter intuitive to simply wait. Yet waiting is what we are told we must do.

We should acknowledge that there are two kinds of waiting – and while we may be impatient by nature and not disposed to waiting of any kind – it is easier to wait when you can see progress. To wait in the checkout line of the grocery store (even while second guessing whether you picked the best line) – that waiting is easier to endure because the line keeps moving and you are able to see some signs of progress.

It is far harder to wait for an outcome that is uncertain in terms of both its timing and its result. Through this parable Jesus is telling his followers that waiting for the Kingdom of God to break in to our weed-filled – hell-filled – world, is the hardest kind of waiting. It is one thing to have the promise that there will be a harvest time, but the uncertainty of when we can expect that harvest is coupled with the fear of how that harvest – how that separation of wheat from weeds – will turn out.

Surely when Jesus is talking about the “weedy people” he has in mind the same people I do; the ones I am certain deserve eternal fire. But in my honest moments I have some doubts, because a piece of the parable of the sheep and goats has stuck in the back of my mind. And then I also remember that Jesus ate and socialized with those “weedy people” – and urged his followers to do the same. The underlying question becomes: “if I abandon those who are the city’s

neediest, will Christ abandon me?” Is that the road to hell that is paved with good intentions?!

What we must abandon instead is our scorecard view of hell. If hell is what awaits those who have accumulated more minuses than pluses then our fate is already sealed, and we should terminate our conversation.

But Jesus’ parable suggests a different view of hell – one where our escape is based not on arithmetic but relationship. There are moments and seasons of hell in each of our lives – times when we feel abandoned – separated from God. But our instructions are to stay connected to one another and to our maker – to keep our roots in the good soil – the soil we must (for now) share with the weeds. Reach out – hold hands – be patient – and wrap ourselves in hope. Wrap yourselves in hope.

Friends, we need to take HOPE seriously. In this dark and clouded world laced through and through with evil, we are called to live lives of hope – not optimism, but hope. “Optimism is grounded largely in the human. Hope on the other hand, is grounded in God (Michael Lindvall, Presbyterian Outlook 7/14/08, pg 23)”.

In the Apostles’ Creed, which many of us memorized at some point in our Christian life, is the phrase that Jesus “descended into Hell.” Without trying to attach geographic specificity to the word “descended” the creed acknowledges our various hells with the claim that Jesus has entered into them with us.

It is that partnership that is the basis for our hope. It does not deny the reality of hell within our lives. It takes seriously the times of desperation in which the separation from God seems unending, when all that registers on the screen of our lives is the agony of abandonment. “My God, My God, why have you abandoned us – our friends – our world?” And into that dark night – into that weed-filled, wheat field, Jesus descends. There is nothing which I am ready to call “hell” that he has not already known. He is there in the midst of the mess. And when we are finally able to take a deep breath, we will realize that in the face of ANY hell we are not – we are never – alone.

And in that is our hope. Thanks be to God.

Amen.