

16 PENTECOST
SEPTEMBER 3/4, 2016

FIRST, MARSHALL
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15
What Dreams May Come

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

18 For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19 in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20 who in former times did not obey ... (1 Pet. 3:18-20)



As I mentioned in the announcements, the topic for today's sermon is a question that Peter raises in the 3rd and 4th chapters of his first letter. Namely, is there anything that can separate us from the love of God – even, and maybe especially, hell?

Let's read together the verses up on the screens:

*18 For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19 in which also he went and made a proclamation to the **spirits in prison**, 20 who in former times did not obey...(1 Pet. 3:18-20)*

Well, to get us started on our discussion about this “fiery” subject, I’m going to tell you a *fairly-socially-acceptable* joke about hell.

Two Catholic nuns were sitting at a baseball game. Unfortunately, right in front of them sat two Protestant beer-drinking buddies who thought they’d have some fun at the good sisters’ expense. The first said in a loud voice, *I think I’m gonna move to **Utah** – I hear they only have a **few Catholics there!***

With a glance over his shoulder, the second guy winked and said, *I think I’m gonna go to **Tibet** – I hear they don’t have **any Catholics there!***

At this point, one sister leaned forward with a smile and sweetly said, *I think you gentlemen should go to **HELL** – I know there are **no Catholics there!***

Hell is certainly a topic that can cause some of us to be agitated, alarmed and anxious – yet like so many things that scare or confuse us, it sometimes feels good to de-claw them a little by laughing about them.

But the truth is, though we may laugh at a joke about hell...in the end, at the moment of death, when it feels like that hooded spirit with the scythe comes knocking at our door for us: the humor is gone, the jokes have ended, the satire has been re-tired.



Hell is the logical consequence of everything we've ever learned since we were old enough to play in the sandbox or backyard:

-If I do what I'm told, I'll be rewarded.

-If I don't do what I'm told, I'll be punished.

Adam and Eve sealed that for us, but good! God says to the first couple: *EVERYTHING that is good for life is yours to nurture, to appreciate, to help, to enjoy... This only I ask of you: do not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil...*

What did Adam and Eve do? And what do you and I do? There's no question where the phrase "forbidden fruit" comes from. I find it absolutely amazing – this switch we have in our psyches that kicks-in the moment we're told **not** to do something.

If you told me to not think about a flower, what do I immediately think of? A flower...

We know this about ourselves – as we confess sometimes:

-we are by nature sinful and unclean, or

-we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves, or

-we have given ourselves into the power of sin...

In short, left to our own efforts, moxie, devices, we are on a one-way journey...to hell. In a **worldly** way, our only defense, our only ace-in-the-hole, our only hope is to point at someone who appears to be a little worse than we are, right?

It's like that old joke about how to survive an attack by a charging grizzly bear. You don't need to be faster than the bear – just faster than the person next to you!!

On a farm with animals, in a city with millions, from a quiet town-or-suburb, near a military base with people from all over the world, it doesn't matter – we know this fact to be almost self-evident: those who obey the law will be blessed, those who disobey it will be punished.

Please raise your hand if that core value was **not** instilled in your heart as a child – because I can't imagine a wide-spread situation in which the opposite truth could flourish.

So we get it about heaven and hell – or at least we think we do!
Unfortunately, most of what seems to inform our understanding of hell doesn't come from the bible but from works like Dante's **Inferno** or Milton's **Paradise Lost**.



So let's put those works on the shelf and look at what the bible says about hell – which isn't all that much!

In the entire New Testament, there are only 23 verses that even mention hell, and half of those warn us to avoid being thrown **into** it – rather than explaining anything **about** it.

Jesus says a few things about hell. One of them that I appreciate is the parable of the Sheep and the Goats from MT 25. Remember the story? The setting is the final judgement (the screens show a famous rendition of this by the artist Fra Angelico from the early 1400's).

The Son of Man sits on the throne and separates the throng of people putting the sheep to his right and the goats to his left. **What's the difference between the two groups?** The sheep did what was right – loved God and took care of their neighbors. The goats did not... And where the sheep are invited into heaven, the Judge says to the goats:

Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

What's the message here? Those who obey the law of love will be blessed, those who disobey the law will be punished.

The Rich Man and Lazarus are the principal characters in Jesus' **other** story about heaven and hell. In **life**, Lazarus is destitute and ignored by the rich man.

Yet when they die, Lazarus goes to heaven and is comforted, while the rich man is sent down to hell where he is tormented and begs to have Lazarus sent to him with a cool drink to ease his suffering.

Again, those who obey the law of love will be blessed, those who disobey the law will be punished.

After an interesting discussion in her World Religions course at college, our daughter once asked me, *So what does the Lutheran Church teach about hell? Are people who don't believe in Jesus going to burn?*

My first response was to say, *I'm not sure there is a Lutheran teaching about hell* – and I'm **still** not.

But then I told her that there **are** some things about hell that **our brand of Lutherans** (!) generally believe. **First** – we believe that GOD ALONE will be the judge of who's a sheep and who's a goat – NO ONE ELSE has that responsibility, that burden, that right. There's **no** way **any** person can judge the condition of another's spirit. So we take Jesus at his word that we can leave the judging up to God.

Secondly, good, solid, Lutheran theology does not need to have HELL populated in order for heaven to be a wonderful place. The eternal suffering of some is not necessary for the eternal delight of others.

Thirdly, in whatever version or vision of HELL we conceive, the unifying factor between them all is that **hell** means being *separated from* God, while **heaven** means *being with* God:

Psalm 23 ends with: *I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

In John 14 Jesus says about his Father's mansion with many rooms:

Where I am, there you may be also.

Now, I've heard a lot of people say (and I'm guessing you have too) something to the effect that: ***I can't believe in a God who would send anyone to hell.*** Well, except for those references to Satan falling from heaven, I can't think of one example in Scripture where God actually consigns anyone to hell – can you?

In the book of Revelation we certainly read references to Hades. But anyone sent to its fiery domain has consistently rebuffed God's goodness and grace, rejected every overture by God to listen to the good news, taken active delight in embracing the powers of evil.

It's more like our heavenly Father sadly allows people the freedom to say NO to God's goodness, to wander off into a far country, to take every good thing they've been given and squander it on whatever kind of dangerous and self-destructive life they choose. In short, it's the parable of the Prodigal Son, right?



You remember the story. A father has two boys. The younger one demands his inheritance early and goes off to a far country where he indulges every fantasy, then ends up broke and broken.

The young man comes home with his head hanging low. But when the father sees him still at a distance, the old man drops what he's doing, runs to his son, showers him with affection, gifts and a party, and gladly welcomes him home.

Now, whom does the father represent? God...so here's a question:

Why does the father allow the boy to squander his hard-earned money? -Is he tired of the kid's whining?

-Is he eager to be rid of a problem child?

-Is he heartless – not caring whether the kid dies or thrives?

-or maybe it's because he honors individual freedom?

I think that the father lets his son go because he understands that some people need to hit bottom before they can hear God's Spirit calling them home. Some people need to find themselves at the very gates of hell before they can see that only in God is there life, love, truth and forgiveness.

The 1998 movie *What Dreams May Come* is a weird but interesting story of heaven and hell. Robin Williams plays a doctor who, along with his two children, die tragic deaths – yet in heaven they then find each other. But his wife, the kids' mother, is devastated – lost in her despair, she commits suicide and, as a result, becomes trapped in hell.



When he hears of her plight, the husband is angry with God until he's assured that she's not being punished for committing an unforgivable sin. Instead, he's told, in a sense, that she simply has closed-up her heart and refused every attempt to break through.

Well, in a heroic and noble move, the husband journeys down in to the depths of hell to see if he can somehow speak a word of good news that his wife might hear. And that, of course, brings us full circle to where we began with our passage from Peter's first letter – specifically his reference to Jesus doing the same thing: dead, but alive, he goes to hell to proclaim a word to the *spirits in prison*.

What do you suppose the Lord said to those poor souls? *Nanny-nanny boo-boo, you blew it!??* **Or**, is the power of God's forgiveness and love strong enough even there to call spirits from sin to salvation?

I'm guessing they heard what we heard in our Gospel passage for today when Jesus said: *The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.*

C. S. Lewis, in his book The Great Divorce, says something similar. He describes a bus line that's always running from hell to heaven with a welcome mat laid out at the pearly gates.

But the problem, and an even greater mystery, is that there are lost spirits, unhappy souls, *ghosts*, as he calls them, who never get off the bus at the Heaven stop. Why? They appear to fear the cleansing touch of Christ more than they fear the hell they know. Though each *ghost* has a story in Lewis' book, none of them have a very good answer. For some reason, they simply have turned their backs on heaven...

This reminds me of a time when I was a child at my Dad's Drugstore in Shelby, Montana. It was a hot and quiet Saturday afternoon when Dad looked outside, opened the front door of the store, and there stood a whining mutt with a muzzle full of porcupine quills. Dad grabbed a pair of pliers, knelt by the dog and yanked-out the first spike. The poor dog yelped and ran off down the street, only to come slinking back a few minutes later.



Whimpering, it stayed still while Dad fixed the pliers on a second quill. He yanked, the dog yelped and took off again...

The mutt soon returned, but never came close enough again for Dad to continue the painful, but necessary, treatment. He whined and looked at us with sad eyes, but scampered off every time we tried to grab him...to help him...to set him free from his misery, his pain...

So here's what I would suggest you say to anyone who asks the question, *How could a loving God send people to hell?* You can assure them that God is **not** in the **business** of sending people to **hell**. You can assure them that God **IS** in the business of offering **endless opportunities** for people – **and dogs** – to be welcomed, cared-for and healed.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul says in Romans, chapter 8:

³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

³⁷ No, says Paul, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that

*Neither **death**, nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, ³⁹ 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.*



When we were in Montana this summer for my Dad's funeral, I listened to someone share about how torn-up they were about their own dad's death. They'd never asked their father about his faith before he died, and now worried that they'd let him slip into hell because they hadn't asked him if he believed in Jesus.

Well, here's one more rock-solid point about Lutheran theology that I absolutely love. Over and over again in the Gospels, and in Paul's writings as well, we hear that it's so much less about what WE need to do to make **ourselves** right with God, and so much MORE about trusting that **God** will stop at **nothing** to bring us into his loving home.

The Gospel, the Good News is that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will actually leave the 99 obedient sheep to go find the one who wandered away and got lost, that Christ is so much more excited about finding the lost coin and the pearl of great value than he could ever be about listening to the pious prattles of those who think that they've earned their way into heaven.

I mean, take a look at the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son. The dad was every bit as wasteful as his son with all the forgiveness and affection that he showered on the child *who once was lost, but now is found*.

And finally, remember the very first sentence we read from Peter's lesson for today. Said the apostle, *For Christ also suffered for sins **once for all**, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.*

You ...and You ...and You ...and me...once for all ...once for *all!*

Amen.