

**First Presbyterian Church  
Southampton, New York  
“Where the Heck is Hell?”**

**Luke 16: 19 – 31  
Matthew 18: 1 – 9**

**July 10, 2016**

When I was a little boy, “hell” was one of the words that I was never allowed to say. It was a “bad” word, a “swear” word, if you will. I could say “heaven” all I liked... but definitely not hell. Oh, I supposed it would’ve been okay for me to use the word in its theological or biblical sense. But if I ever got caught telling someone to *go* there... or if I said that my Mom’s stuffed cabbage *tasted* like it... or if I used it to emphasize the word “*no!*”... well, that was a different story! Using the word “hell” in that way would have gotten me into a *heck* of a lot of trouble!

So, I’ve always been a little uncomfortable with the word Hell... I always feel a little guilty when I use it. I mean, even today! Really! As I prepared this sermon, this little worrisome voice in the back of my mind kept asking me, “Is it really all right to repeatedly say the word “hell” in my Sunday sermon? What if someone thinks I’m up here swearing all morning?” That’s a lot of pressure, believe me!

Anyway, as I’ve reflected on the subject of hell this past week, it occurred to me that my *personal* ambivalence about that word might be something of a “mirror image” of our *corporate* ambivalence about the subject of hell. And what I mean by that is, I think that, to a certain extent, we’re *all* uncomfortable talking, or even thinking, about hell. And not because we’re worried about it being some kind of “swear word,” but because most of us are probably not all that clear about what hell really is, or how it works, or what it’s like. And what little we *do* know about it sure isn’t very appealing! For most of us, the extent of our knowledge is that, whatever else hell may be, it’s bad... and it’s definitely something to be avoided!

That being said, my purpose in *raising hell* this morning (as a sermon topic!) is to simply offer a few brief reflections on the subject, in order to help us clarify our thoughts and deepen our understanding. I suppose that my basic opinion about the subject of hell roughly parallels the attitude which the great Christian writer C. S. Lewis had about demons: we don’t want to be *preoccupied* with the subject and spend an inordinate amount of time worrying and speculating about it... but neither do we want to ignore it entirely and pretend that it isn’t real or doesn’t matter. In that spirit, then, let’s take just a few minutes to reflect on the basic Christian doctrine of “Hell.”

To begin with, it needs to be admitted that one of the reasons why there’s so much uncertainty and confusion about the subject of hell, is because the Bible itself really doesn’t have very much to say about it. And what it *does* say is mysterious, ambiguous, and easy for us to misunderstand.

For the record, both Old and New Testaments do acknowledge the existence of a reality that we would call “Hell,” or an afterlife place of punishment and retribution...

and the New Testament has more to say about it than the Old. But there is very little in the way of detailed description about this reality, even in the New Testament. Which really shouldn't bother us or surprise us, because there are equally few detailed descriptions in the Bible about heaven, or the "new creation" too! As Paul reminded his Corinthian friends: "No eye hath seen, nor ear heard what God has prepared for those who love Him!"

You see, there's always been an inherent sense of mystery surrounding what God has in store for us in the life to come. And one of the reasons for that is because, from the perspective of the ancient Jews, what happens to us after we die is God's business... and not ours. Our business is to live *this life* in obedience and faithfulness to God, and to leave *eternity* in the hands of our just, faithful, and loving Lord.

The Jews were much more interested in what a person did with the life which God had given him or her *now...* than they were in what would happen to that person after his or her death. So, consequently, the Bible simply doesn't contain a lot of speculation and description about the life to come... whether that life be in Heaven or in Hell. So, my first point is simply that we need to acknowledge the reality of Hell... but not worry about the fact that our knowledge about Hell is, of necessity, limited and incomplete.

This brings us to another important issue to consider this morning... and that is, the *nature* of Hell. In other words, what is Hell like? There are, as we know, numerous popular depictions of Hell in the movies, in books, and on television. I used to have a cartoon on the wall in my office, which shows a bunch of people, who were obviously in Hell, milling around a large coffee pot. And one of the characters is saying: "Oh man! The coffee's *cold!* They thought of everything!"

And then there's an old episode of *The Twilight Zone*, in which a gangster who, having arrived in Hell, discovered that it was a place in which you immediately receive everything you want... which was great for awhile, but very quickly the novelty wore off, and Hell became a place of unbearable and unrelenting *boredom*. Summer traffic on Montauk Highway and Route 39 can certainly seem like Hell; as can four more months of presidential political campaigning, and all the soundbites that go with it. And of course, other descriptions of Hell are variations on the familiar themes of smoke, fire, high temperatures, and assorted nasties with horns and pitchforks! And what each of these pictures have in common is that, in one way or another, they're all *very* unpleasant! And in our lesson from Matthew, Jesus also uses an unpleasant picture to depict Hell.

In our text, He is quoted as using the expression, "the fire of hell." The actual Greek word which Matthew uses is Gehenna (Γεηννα) which is an Aramaic form of the Hebrew word which means, "the Valley of Hinnom." Now, the Valley of Hinnom is a deep ravine which runs to the south of the Old City of Jerusalem. And it was in that valley, during the time of the Jewish Monarchy, that some apostate Jews burned their children as sacrifices to the pagan god, Moloch. Under King Josiah, that practice was stopped, and the Valley of Hinnom was turned into a garbage dump for the city... and a smoldering fire burned in that dump twenty-four hours a day. So, when Jesus referred to "the fire of hell," He was actually using this burning garbage pit as a vivid illustration of a place where no one should ever wish to find themselves.

In this passage, Jesus doesn't necessarily give us a "Polaroid" snapshot of what Hell is actually like... but He does make it clear that, whatever it may be like, it's not going to be pleasant. "*Better that you should make any sacrifice you have to,*" He says, "*than that you should wind up in a place like Gehenna.*" The great Reformation theologian John Calvin, in his "*Institutes of the Christian Religion,*" beautifully states what is really at stake when we consider the nature of Hell. Listen to what he writes:

*"No description can deal adequately with the gravity of God's vengeance against the wicked" so "their torments and tortures are figuratively expressed to us by physical things, that is, by darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth... and unquenchable fire. By such expressions the Holy Spirit certainly intended to confound all our senses with dread... as by such details we should be enabled in some degree to fix our thoughts upon this: how wretched it is to be cut off from all fellowship with God."*

What Calvin is saying there is that the vivid and horrifying images of Hell which come to us in texts like our passage from Matthew, are to help us understand how awful it would be to be utterly cut off from our life with God. And therein lies the true understanding of the nature of Hell: separation and alienation from God. To be "in Hell," or to "go to Hell," is to be utterly cut off from all contact with God. When we think about Hell in this way, we realize that Hell *isn't* so much a "place" where one might "go..." it's much more a "condition" which one might "experience."

This understanding of Hell is implicit in the agony that Jesus suffered on the cross. Keep in mind, it was not just *dying* that so terrified and agonized Jesus... it was the experience of being cut off, alienated, and separated from His Father that was by far more awful. It was in this sense that Jesus "descended into Hell," as we confess in the Apostles' Creed. We can't fully conceive of what life would be like were God *utterly* absent. We sometimes get a small glimpse of what it would be like, for example when we must endure some enormous grief or suffering which leaves us feeling as if we've been abandoned or forsaken by God. But even then, God is still with us, even if we can't perceive His presence at that moment. To be *utterly and completely* without that presence is, in the biblical view of things, the most hideous and unbearable experience that there is. That is "Hell."

You know, it's not a particularly cheery thought to realize that something like Hell exists at all. I can't say that I know a single person who's happy about the reality of Hell. And there have been plenty of people who've walked away from God because they just don't want to accept that reality. For example, one of the things that drove Charles Darwin away from Christianity was his contempt for the church's teaching on Hell.

And, certainly, when the threat of Hell is used as a weapon with which to browbeat and bully people into a cringing relationship with an angry and vengeful God... it's no wonder that some of them are turned off from seeking fellowship with Him. We probably all know people, pastors, or churches who's primary evangelistic tool for bringing people to Jesus... is the promise that, if you *don't* come to Jesus, you can look forward to an eternity of unremitting pain, anguish, and suffering in the fiery pits of Hell.

This was certainly the approach of Pastor Jonathan Edwards, in his sermon about "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," some excerpts of which I preached last year as part of our 375<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration. As you may recall, that sermon isn't

exactly a celebration of potlucks, Sunday school picnics, and Christmas pageants! It's an uninterrupted ninety minute reminder of the misery that awaits, if you don't invite Jesus into your heart. Scaring people into a relationship with the Lord; terrifying people into heaven by a recitation of the horrors of Hell; may have some place, some use, in the overall experience of our life of faith. But, surely our relationship with God is more than that. Surely our life of discipleship is founded on more than divine threats, and promises of punishment for those of us who don't measure up.

Surely our Christian faith is way less about Hell, and way more about the loving, gracious, merciful God who's reached into our hearts and souls to bring us to Himself... so that we need never fear Hell in the first place. And at the end of the day, that's the good news in all this: that no one ever need experience the reality of Hell at all... whatever it might be like! The entire story of the Bible, from beginning to end, is the story of Almighty God doing everything He can to keep us in His presence, and to give to us His love!

God's desire is for all of us to be in His loving presence always... in earthly life, and also in eternity. That was the motivation of the establishment of the Covenant with Israel... it was the motivation for the sending of God's Son to live and die on our behalf... and it's the motivation behind God's constantly reaching out to us, even today, with the offer of grace, and hope, and eternal life!

Really, the only way that we can *not* be in God's presence is if we reject it... and turn our backs on it. And, as free creatures, that's something that we always have the power and the freedom to do. But God will never do it *to* us. As the esteemed British physicist and churchman John Polkinghorne has written, "the door to Hell is locked from the inside!"

We know, and we serve, a God whose love for us is so great, that He gave His only Son in order to share it with us. May we be challenged, and may we be encouraged, to reach out to that God... and to accept His love, His mercy, and His grace, each and every day of our lives! For that is our calling, and that is our quest... as brothers and sisters in Christ!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!