

Homily – The Soul’s Union with God

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Here is a provocative statement.

No other Biblical figure speaks more often of hell than Jesus. Granted, he has a lot more to say about money, and pride, and forgiveness, but still no other Biblical figure speaks more often of hell than Jesus.

Just look at today’s Gospel reading. Earlier we heard *“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ... And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.”*

Six times in the Gospel according to Matthew, once in the Gospel according to Luke and, as we just heard, three times in Mark, Jesus talks about hell. There are only four other references to hell in the entire Bible.

Now, in the Bible there are other terms and images that we associate with hell. Hades or Sheol is the place of the dead,” and it is used in some ancient traditions in reference to the destination of both the righteous and the wicked. Greek and Roman mythology were strong influences on this concept of Hades that we find in the Bible.

And, in the Bible the term “Gehenna” refers to the “Valley of Hinnom”, which was a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem. It was a place where people burned their garbage and thus there was always a fire burning there. And, bodies of those deemed to have died in sin without hope of salvation were thrown there to be destroyed. Gehenna, this valley outside Jerusalem, is used in the New Testament as a metaphor for the final place of punishment for the wicked after the resurrection.

And, curiously, images and ideas about hell in contemporary culture have been more shaped by poets and writers than they have been by the Bible. In his “Divine Comedy”, set in the year 1300, Dante used Virgil as a guide through the Inferno. Virgil himself is not condemned to Hell proper in Dante's poem but is rather confined to another fictional place called Limbo just at the edge of Hell. The geography of Hell is very elaborately laid out in this work, with nine concentric rings leading deeper into the Earth and deeper into the various punishments of Hell, until, at the center of the world, Dante puts Satan himself trapped in a frozen lake. A small tunnel leads past Satan and out to the other side of the world, at the base of yet another fictional place called Mount Purgatory. However, we must always remember that this imagery

from Dante is all fiction and really has nothing to do with a spiritual journey with God.

And more than three hundred years ago, John Milton's book "Paradise Lost" opens with the fallen angels, including their leader Satan, waking up in Hell after having been defeated in the war in heaven. Milton portrays Hell as the abode of the demons, and the prison from which they plot their revenge upon Heaven through the corruption of the human race. However, once again we must always remember that this imagery from Milton is all fiction and really has nothing to do with a spiritual journey with God.

These works of fiction have nothing to do with the Bible, but they have still been layered into our contemporary images and ideas about hell. Throughout our existence, human beings have been trying to understand what happens to us after death and the Bible and Jesus have some things to say, but contrary to popular confusion, the Bible does not show us that we are destined by eternal damnation and hell. Today, as we hear some of the words of Jesus about hell, I want to share the good news we have from Jesus about hell.

First, hell is not a place but instead it is being separated from God's reality. It is the loss of any inner experience of who we are in God. Each and every one of us was created to be in union with God, and hell is being outside of that union. It is living outside "the garden" or being in the smoldering garbage dump of Gehenna, outside the city walls of Jerusalem. It is a state of separation. Again, it is the loss of any inner experience of who you are in God.

Second, the Genesis story of Judeo-Christian tradition says that we were created in the very "image and likeness" of God, proceeding from free and overflowing love. Throughout the Bible, this flow of love is rediscovered and re-experienced by various imperfect people. This sets us on a positive and hopeful foundation, which cannot be overstated. At our core, each and every one of us has an invaluable, immortal diamond. We are all made by God with beauty.

Yet we must also recognize that this positive foundation never gained full traction in the life of most followers of Jesus. Perhaps, such utter grace was just too good to be believed. However, the Bible as a whole illustrates through various stories humanity's unity with God, the total gratuity of God's love, and unfortunately, humanities continued resistance to that Good News.

Furthermore, I find that many Christians still have no knowledge of this beauty and of the soul's union with God. Instead, we quote Augustine's "original sin," Calvin's "total depravity," or Luther's "humans are like piles of manure, covered over by Christ." I

am sure they all meant well, but they also dug a pit so deep that many could never climb out or allow themselves to be lifted out. What a shame, literally! Such a negative starting point for a view of humanity has not been very effective in creating loving people.

I stand up here today to encourage you to let go of these distracting and misleading images for, the grace of God can only be trusted by an equally graceful and beautiful understanding of human nature.

Many Christians have tried to pile a positive theology of salvation on top of a very negative understanding of the human person, and it just does not work. Instead, we need to re-embrace the original beauty that we see from the Genesis story and let go of the misleading and unhelpful concepts of original sin, total depravity, hell and damnation. Yes, sin separates us from God, but we are made to be in union with God, and that is the Good News of Jesus.

Now, so far in this sermon I have talked about hell as separation from God. I've talked about the popular but false images of hell as a place of human damnation that is bursting with demons and imps. I've also talked about how we are made in the image of God with a beauty that is our birthright. And, as we replace a negative view of humanity with a positive one, there is a last point I want to make. The Good News that we have in Jesus assures us that God is always present with each and every one of us and that God's love for us is eternal and unchanging. There is nothing we can do to increase God's love for us and there is nothing that we can do to decrease God's love for us.

In the same vein, the good news we have from Jesus is that we can't accomplish or work up to union with God, because we already have it. The biblical revelation is about awakening, not accomplishing. It is about realization, not performance. And, we cannot **get** there, we can only **be** there. Only the humble can receive it, we must surrender to it. God loves us and created us to be in union. There is no hell except for the state of mind in which we separate ourselves from God. And as I said yesterday at the memorial for Bob Hawkins, after death we all will see that our separation from God was an illusion, and we are already eternally in union with God. My prayer is that we live into this truth. You are already, and have always been, held by the loving embrace of God.