

The Rev. Luke Selles

Proper 21, Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

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In the popular imagination, hell is a place of fire, of eternal torment, condemnation, and punishment. It is a place where no one wants to go, a place we might wish only on our worst enemies, especially if they have not been punished or received their God's Justice in this life. For centuries, hell has also been used as a form of control over people's behavior – and is even now used as a weapon against groups of people. And here, Jesus, seems to be reinforcing that understanding of hell as a place of punishment.

What is interesting is that there is no biblical consensus on whether it even exists, let alone what it would look like if it does. In fact, during Jesus' time many Jews did not believe that there was an afterlife, or resurrection from the dead. Here the word used is Greek for "the 'unseen place,'" referring to the (invisible) realm in which all the dead reside." In the Hebrew Bible, the analogous word used is "sheol" – a still, dark place – the grave. In other places, to refer to judgment, the Hebrew word "Gahenna," which means "lake of fire" – it referred to a specific place, a place of child sacrifice, which was later used as a trash heap. The rich man in our passage seems to have been sent to that place.

But I don't think we can mine this passage for a theology of hell or the afterlife. The passage is a parable, a story, told to a specific group in Jesus' time, and in focusing on hell, we may miss Jesus' social commentary and his teaching on God's Justice and Mercy. Hell is and always has been a mirror of our own understanding of cosmic Justice. Here we are told in the verses leading up to our passage, that Jesus was teaching the Pharisees, the religious leaders of a Jewish group of which he was a part, who believed in the resurrection of the dead and the afterlife and who were, according to Luke, also "lovers of money."

In the parable the rich man is enjoying his great wealth. He enjoys sumptuous feasts and luxurious clothing, while the man at his gate – a beggar – is starving, sick, pitiful. The rich man ignores the man. Ironically, the rich man is left unnamed, while the beggar is: Lazarus, or "God has helped." In life, a rich man saw nothing wrong with Lazarus' state, accepting his suffering just as he accepted his extreme wealth – he saw no responsibility for Lazarus' suffering. The detail about Lazarus's sores, his leprosy, and his being licked by dogs, for Jesus' Jewish audience, would have reinforced that

Lazarus was ritually unclean – in his state of abject poverty, he was unable to keep the divine purity laws.

And yet it is Lazarus who ascends into heaven – to what the text most closely translates to the “bosom” of Abraham, the great fore-father of the divine covenant to the people who would become the Israelites, to enjoy eternal paradise. And it is the clean and royally attired rich man who goes “to eternal torment.”

When the rich man calls out for mercy, he does not address Lazarus directly, but begs Abraham to send Lazarus to offer him mercy. There is no recognition on the rich man’s part of Lazarus’ state in life and no repentance of his own ways in his life – he still feels that he can call to Abraham for mercy while treating Lazarus as an object.

Abraham replies, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.” This drives home the central irony, the great reversal: Lazarus’ life was a hell. His life, though, was holy to God. But the rich man, who had everything in life, who made his life about his own pleasure, his own honor, made his own paradise, but lost everything.

Abraham says that there is a great chasm between the rich man and him and Lazarus – I think this illustrates probably the best way of describing hell, if there is such a thing: separation from God and separation from all God’s creation. Without God, there is no life. The rich man is seeing what he saw as Just in his own lifetime is then returned to him in death – for he had understood the way that the world was as just, but he couldn’t know mercy. And, therefore, without knowing mercy, he couldn’t know God’s Justice. And without repenting, he is not able to see Lazarus, and he is not able to see Lazarus as worthy of God’s mercy, and thus he has condemned himself to separation from God. Now the Pharisees would have heard this because the teaching of the Torah, the divine law, was “shalom” – the cosmic understanding of justice, peace, and flourishing for all. The danger of wealth, then and now, is that it can be justified, that we can begin to justify our own wealth, and use it to deny our interdependence on everyone and everything around us. But in doing so we separate ourselves from knowledge of God’s justice, and thus from God and from others.

Knowing God’s Justice means first understanding ourselves as objects of God’s Mercy. Only from this place can we understand and access the true wealth that God offers, a wealth that has no material or transactional benefit. The wealth that God offers is right relationship. In the passage right after this

parable, Jesus teaches about confession and forgiveness. The chasm that Abraham is referring to, I believe, is the breach that has been made between Lazarus and the rich man, between the rich and the poor, the have and have nots, in all human societies. In Jesus, in God's Word of Justice and Mercy, we can repent, confess, and be forgiven for our sins. From this place of repentance, we can then have restored and deepened our relationship with one another, mending the breach, the chasm that threatens our fellowship. And right now, friends, that is our witness in this place and in all of our communities. Amen.