

Hell in the Here and Now

Luke 16:19-31

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on September 25, 2016]

I

How are we to understand the story of the rich man and Lazarus?

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind is that this story is a **parable**.

Like all the parables of Jesus, it contains important theological truths,
which we would sometimes rather avoid,
but which we would do well to learn and practice in our lives.

But listen carefully: *this is a parable, not a digital photograph sent back from hell.*

Jesus is not joining the feeding frenzy of jealous people who revel in the demise of the rich and famous.

Gossip columnists,
supermarket tabloids,
unscrupulous reporters—
all conspire to bring down the high and mighty.

Take, for example, the troubles of Olympic swimmer Ryan Lochte after he and three other members of the American swim team lied about what happened at a gas station after a night of partying at a nightclub in Rio de Janeiro.

Perhaps his stint on *Dancing with the Stars* will restore his flagging public image.

That, however, is not what Jesus is about.

Jesus came to seek and to save those who are lost.

Even if we are glad when Humpty Dumpty has a great fall,
Jesus is not in the business of piling on those who are down.

He is in the business of bringing life to the dead
and of setting free those who find themselves captive in hell,
whether of their own making, or not.

II

So...what are we to make of the rich man dying and going to hell?

The church has always believed in hell.

Once upon a time we believed in a literal hell.

The traditional Christian belief is that hell is a literal place with flames where people burn for eternity.

Preachers proclaimed that the only way to avoid hell was to trust Jesus as Savior.

For centuries the church used the fear of hell as its primary evangelistic appeal.

Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan divine, in June 1741 preached what is arguably the most famous sermon in American history,
“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

In a sermon that lasted over three hours, Edwards dangled his congregation over the fires of hell by the slender thread of a spider’s web.

It is said that he had to cut short the sermon due to the weeping and moaning of the congregation, in terror of the threat of judgment and the flames of hell.

I cannot imagine preaching that way today.

But for many years “hell fire and brimstone” was the church’s standard fare.

How many of you grew up with that kind of preaching?

“Turn or burn” was what preachers cried (I recently saw that on a church sign not too far from here).

In fact, in my research on Jonathan Edwards’ sermon, I discovered that Billy Graham re-preached Edwards’ famous sermon at his seminal Los Angeles crusade in November 1949—

perhaps because after almost eight weeks of preaching every night he was running out of material—

however Graham softened it by speaking more of God's mercy and everlasting love than Edwards did.

That was then, but now hell has fallen on hard times and suffers from low ratings.

When was the last time you heard a sermon on hell?

Now hell is the butt of jokes.

Gary Larson, creator of *The Far Side*, made a fortune on various versions of hell.

One of his classics shows a line of sweating men marching past the devil on their descent into hell, and the plaque on the wall reads,

"Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

Hell has become a common word in American slang.

Consider these examples from Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable:

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

All hell broke loose.

She gave me hell.

Ride hell for leather.

To work like hell.

War is hell.

A TV show: *Hell on Wheels*.

A current movie: *Hell or High Water*.

Perhaps you've seen the bumper sticker—

Read the Bible...it will scare the hell out of you.

There were Methodist and Baptist churches across the street from each other.

The Methodist sign announced the sermon title: *“There Is No Hell.”*

The Baptist sign responded: *“The Hell There Ain’t.”*

Did you know there is a town in Michigan named Hell?

It is 12 miles northwest of Ann Arbor on Highway D-36;
it’s the home of the Devil’s Day Hellfest.

It’s also the place where we fans of the Ohio State University Buckeyes
would like that ‘team from up north’ to go.

You can buy a baseball bat, but not **a bat out of hell.**

Grocery stores sell those pink and white Hostess cupcakes called ‘Snowballs,’
but should you buy them for your kids?—
not a snowball’s chance in hell!

Which reminds me of another of Gary Larson’s classic cartoons:

Two devils are standing talking when a small white ball flies over their
heads. The first devil says,
“Look, Sid! Another snowball. I tell you, this place is slipping.”

III

Here’s the situation: **Belief in a literal hell is slipping.**

Once upon a time most Christians believed that way, but over the last century we
have seen a shift to a more metaphorical understanding of hell as separation from
God.

Now much of mainline Christianity embraces the view of hell as symbolic of
alienation from God.

As a result, the threat of hell lacks the intensity it once possessed.

People may have a vague notion of hell,

but they are no longer frightened by it.

Scholars who specialize in moral development say that the first appeal to people with a primitive knowledge of God is fear.

The most basic preaching then is the threat of hell.

As people develop morally, the second stage is the carrot and the stick of God's promise.

According to this view,
if we are good, God will be good to us and send us to heaven.

If we are bad,
God will withhold goodness and send us *to that other place*.

In fact, part of Jesus' purpose in this parable is to refute the Pharisees' belief that being rich is a result of being righteous.

Jesus will have nothing to do with the so-called "prosperity gospel."

So as the fear of hell declined, preachers could no longer convince people that they better get right with God right now,
lest they die in a car accident on the way home from church
and end up spending eternity in hell.

A whole series of buffers then evolved to make hell seem less reality and more fantasy.

We live much longer lives.

We are more affluent.

Some people feel no need for God and,
not believing in God,
they see no life after death.

Many others live as if there were no God,
and, as though this life is the only one that matters.

IV

I want to set forth a third way of viewing hell that is different from the literal view and the symbolic view.

I believe in hell—chew on that for a moment.

I believe that hell is intensely real,
and Jesus would not waste his time preaching about an imaginary horror.

There is something dreadfully real about this parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

Lazarus is the only character given a name in any of Jesus' parables

The name 'Lazarus' means "God helps."

Do you see the irony in that?

No one helps Lazarus while he is alive.

He is a crippled beggar whose body is covered with running sores that the dogs come and lick.

Lazarus dies, and dare we ask, why?

Did he die of starvation while a few feet away the rich man was feasting sumptuously?

Did he freeze to death one night outside the house where the rich man slept on linen sheets?

Did he die of infected sores while the rich man was enjoying a hot bath and anointing himself with the finest oils?

Or did the dogs?...let's leave that to the imagination.

Lazarus dies and is carried by the angels to the bosom of Abraham,
reminiscent of the bodily translations of Enoch, Elijah, and Moses.

The Jews regarded the bosom of Abraham as the place of highest bliss,
a place of paradise.

The rich man also dies.

Again, dare we ask, why?

Did he die of overeating while Lazarus starved?

Was his death hastened by the excess food that could have been given to Lazarus?

The rich man is buried,
presumably in the purple robes in which he had lived,
and ends up in *Hades*.

Hades was regarded as the place where the dead awaited final judgment.

By the first century C.E., Hades was thought to be divided into various regions according to a person's moral state.

Later the concept evolved into the idea of *Gehenna*,
a transliteration of the Hebrew word *ge hinnom*,
the valley of Hinnom,
which was a deep ravine just south of Jerusalem that served as
the town dump.

It was the place where, seven centuries before Jesus, the wicked King Ahaz offered human sacrifices to the pagan god Baal.

By the time of Jesus, Gehenna had become a symbol of the place of fiery torment reserved for the wicked at the last judgment.

We see this reflected in our text,
as Lazarus is in paradise,
and the rich man is in torment.

And here is the biggest surprise in the story...
the great reversal that is at the heart of Jesus' message:

**The one who was poor is now rich;
the one who was rich is now poor.**

The tables are turned and the one who experienced hell on earth now enjoys the bliss of heaven,
 while the one who had all the blessings of life now is in hell.

V

What point is Jesus making in telling this parable?

Here's what I think: **Hell is here and now.**

For too many people life on earth is already hell.

Wherever children face fear and hunger, violence and death from easily preventable diseases,
 hell is real.

Whenever a society finds itself drowning in violence, crime, poverty, and homelessness,
 people are living in hell.

Whenever bigoted, hateful people target a particular ethnic or religious group for what we euphemistically call "ethnic cleansing,"
 that is hell.

Think of the gun violence that has claimed over 280,000 American lives in the last decade and five more in a mall near Seattle Friday night.

Think of the civilian population of Aleppo, Syria enduring four years of daily bombardment and air strikes as the civil war drags on.

Think of Rakeyia Scott of Charlotte, NC, who watched her husband Keith Scott shot and killed by police officers even though she told them he was unarmed and begged them not to shoot.

Think of older adults like Terry Jones of Monty Python fame, diagnosed with dementia, facing a future of fading memories.

Think of all the ways that people can and do make life hell for others,
 as well as all the ways the church has created hell for others—

The crusades and inquisitions and persecutions of those who believed differently;

The support of slavery in America in the 19th century, Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 40s, and Apartheid in South Africa in 1960s, 70s, and 80s;

The cruel, rigid fundamentalism that interprets the Bible literally, thereby excluding divorced people, women pastors, LGBT persons, and others who are different.

And don't forget this election season and all the ways it is much more like hell than like heaven.

Oh, yes, there is hell, and it is here and now.

VI

But let us go one step further as we attempt to understand this parable.

If hell exists in the here and now, it stands in sharp contrast to the eternal life that we receive in Jesus.

The language of the New Testament presents salvation in three tenses:

I was saved,
I am being saved,
I will be saved.

These three tenses correspond to the church's doctrines of justification, sanctification, and glorification.

Eternal life is not just "in the sweet by and by when we die;"
it is here and now.

It is the presence of God in our daily lives producing love, joy, peace, and power.

A New Testament scholar points out that the idea of salvation includes the process of being saved.

In the same way, those living outside of a relationship with God are in the process of perishing.

Remember how the second half of John 3:16 reads:

“...that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

It is just as true to say,

“I was lost,
I am being lost;
I will be lost.”

In other words, **hell can be here and now.**

We are a perishing people.

Look at the facts:

Our bodies begin a slow decline and no one has yet figured out how to reverse our perishing nature.

The perishable must put on the imperishable, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15.

Hell is not a geographic place where you just show up one day and find yourself incredibly hot under the collar.

Life is already hell for those living without God
and without hope in the here and now.

You can see this in our text.

What was the greatest sin of the rich man?

That he ignored the need of the beggar at his gate?

Or that he lived a life totally devoid of God,
a life that excluded God,
and as a result he ignored the hell
in which the poor man at his gate was living?

Hell is a life lived without God and without hope in the world.

Hell is that sense of meaninglessness that results from an absence of the love, light, and grace of God.

It is separation from God and from all that is good and just and peaceful in the world.

We create hell with each awful choice we make that leads to misery, unhappiness, dread, and anger.

Oh, yes, I believe in hell!

Hell in the here and now!

VII

My friends, this story of the rich man and Lazarus is really not about the afterlife.

There's nothing we can do for the rich man—
he is finished.

The real key to the story is the speech of Abraham about the living.

Abraham says we must hear Moses and the prophets (i.e., the Word of God)
if we are to avoid hell ourselves
and help those who are living in hell here and now.

The five brothers and the Word of God—
that is what's really at stake here.

No one will appear from the dead
and there will be no proof offered.

We are the five brothers who need to hear the Word.

If we do not hear this Word...
and are not brought to life here and now,
we cannot be helped by messengers from the dead.

Unlike the rich man, we still have a choice.

We can choose to hear the Word and receive the gift of eternal life here and now.

It is not God's will that any portion of your life—
 past,
 present,
 or future—
 be hell.

Jesus stands between hell and us and he calls us to focus on how to make earth more like heaven instead of more like hell.

He hangs at the crossroads between heaven and hell.

He has opened the way of life to you
 and he will not let you go without a fight.

I invite you to trust in him,
 to look to him to set you free from whatever personal hell
 you might be experiencing right now.

Look deep into your soul
 and know that whatever of hell is already there
 it can be removed by your choice to trust your life to the Word made
 flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Receive his gift of eternal life here and now.

That will be heaven for you and me.

Amen.

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