

“Don’t Go To Hell”
Rev. Susan M. Prichard
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Mark 9:38-50

In today’s lesson, many of Jesus’ more interesting quotes emerge. Listen for and hear God’s word to us in Mark’s words.

Mark 9:38-50

If you didn’t know me, you might think that this was going to be one of those 19th century, fire and brimstone kinds of sermons. But those kinds of sermons haven’t been popular in congregational churches in a very long time. Other traditions may still use some of that fiery rhetoric, but I don’t like it much. I don’t think faith in God should be dependent on fear. The God of grace and love that I know, doesn’t demand our obedience out of fear, but expects our obedience out of love. It’s hard to love someone you fear.

The credit for today’s sermon title goes to William Willimon. In his commentary on today’s text, he explains the biblical understanding of hell at Jesus’ time, and how that helps to inform this text.

“The best known biblical images for hell relates to a deep, narrow gorge southeast of Jerusalem called *ge ben hinnom*, ‘the Valley of Ben Hinnom’, in which it is said that rebellious and unfaithful Israelites once offered up child sacrifices to the pagan gods Molech and Baal (2Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31-32; 19:2-6). Thus it was forever condemned by Josiah as an unholy place (2 Kings 23:10).

“Later the valley was used as a garbage dump by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus the Valley of Ben Hinnom became known as the dump, the place of destruction by fire in the Jewish tradition. The Greek word *gehenna*, ‘hell’, commonly used in the New Testament for the final and eternal punishment, is derived from the Hebrew name for this valley.

“Hell is thus a place of rot, of mutilated bodies and revulsion. To this the Old Testament adds the image of burning. Perhaps the burning is related to the idea of purging, of sacrificial fire destroying something that is offensive to God.” (Pulpit Resource, p.54)

So, here we have Jesus telling the disciples that there are choices to make in life. This is not a new thought, but as they get closer and closer to Jerusalem, he wants to make sure they understand the importance of the decisions they (we) make. He wants them to make choices that are life-giving, not life-taking—choices that enrich lives, not ones that cause decay and destruction.

First, he tells them NOT to stop people doing good work in his name, just because they aren’t part of their group. This is a lesson we all would be wise to heed. There are millions of people around the world who do good in the name of Jesus that we would not be able to identify with. And just because they are not part of our group, be

that United Church of Christ, or Congregational, or mainline protestant, or American, does not mean they are not part of Jesus' 'other flocks' as he talks about in John's gospel.

Next, he talks about those who lead others, especially children, into sin. I don't know if you've ever seen a millstone—those huge circles of stone that are used to grind grains and olives-- but no one with a millstone tied around their necks, is ever going to swim to shore. A stark example to get the disciples to appreciate how important Jesus felt an obligation to protect children and the spiritually vulnerable from victimization, especially by those who claim to be Christian.

And then, we get to hell. No, we don't actually go to hell, but to Jesus' teaching about it. We don't talk much about hell in our tradition. It isn't an uplifting biblical theme. And, we need to be clear that Jesus' isn't talking about an underworld controlled by the devil in this text. He's talking about a specific garbage pit that has a history in the lives of the Hebrew people. A place where things rot and burn. A public place where unclean things are thrown away—even people. Leper colonies were frequently down by the dump, where they could scavenge for scraps and beg for alms. Dead diseased animals might be thrown there; enemies who died in battle. It was definitely not a nice place.

Willimon goes on to say: “Thus Jesus says, ‘Take care. Make choices wisely. Choose this day where you are headed. It would be better for you to let go of some aspect of your body or soul, than to have both body and soul thrown into the garbage dump of eternity. Your life is precious. Don't let it be discarded on the trash heap of life. God doesn't make any garbage, and God made you.’” (p.55)

One of the reasons I decided to use this text this morning is that I am more concerned about the hell that is here on earth, than any eternal hell. It is the hell here on earth that we have the ability to do something about. Willaim Stringfellow is quoted as saying: “The Body of Christ lives in the world on behalf of the world, in intercession for the world...For lay folk in the church this means that there is no forbidden work. There is no corner of human existence, however degraded or neglected, into which they may not venture; no person, however beleaguered or possessed, whom they may not befriend and represent....Christians are distinguished by their radical esteem for the Incarnation...by their reverence for the life of God in the whole of creation, even and, in a sense, especially, creation in the travail of sin.

“The characteristic place to find Christians is among their enemies.

The first place to look for Christ is in hell.” (*A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow ed. Bill Wylie Kellerman*). (Pulpit Resource, p. 56)

We know from countless Bible stories that Jesus sought out those who were discarded by society. He befriended tax collectors, prostitutes, orphans, widows, lepers, Gentiles, and the mentally, physically and spiritually ill. He ministered to people of different races, classes and religions. He went where many feared to pass and lifted up those whom society avoided. And, so should we.

Are there people in places who are abandoned: orphanages, nursing homes, prisons, mental institutions, shelters or on the street? Are there people who live in fear of food insufficiency or foreclosure that we could help?

And now, we come full circle. “Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him.” And Jesus said: “Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will soon after be able to speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is for us. For truly I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward.”

So, whether or not we go to hell—literally or figuratively—is a choice that we make. Isn't it? Jesus descended into hell to save the lost, shouldn't we?

Thanks be to God. Amen.