

Homily – The Soul’s Union with God

Rob Keim

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church

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 any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 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 foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. 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 time 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" or "grave", 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.

And, 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 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 shaped more by poets and writers than they have been by the Bible. In his “Divine Comedy”, set in the year 1300, Dante employed the concept of taking Virgil as his guide through Inferno. Virgil himself is not condemned to Hell proper in Dante's poem but is rather, as a virtuous pagan, confined to 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 finds 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 the Mount of Purgatory.

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 and the action returns there at several points throughout the poem. Milton portrays Hell as the abode of the demons, and the passive prison from which they plot their revenge upon Heaven through the corruption of the human race.

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 they are not that we are destined by eternal damnation and hell.

For you see, 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 you 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 in the smoldering garbage dump of Gehenna, outside the city walls of Jerusalem. It is a state of separation, when the part poses as the Whole. Again, it is the loss of any inner experience of who you are in God.

At the beginning of time, the Christ was the first emanation of God. This perfect union of matter and spirit, that we call the Christ, is throughout all of time and space, and 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.

Through 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.

Yet we must also say that this positive foundation never gained full traction in the life of many believers, either Jewish or Christian. Perhaps, such utter gratuity was just too good to be true. Or maybe it was rejected since we could not control or manipulate this love; and anything humans cannot control, we do not engage with or enjoy. The Bible as a whole illustrates through various stories humanity's objective unity with God, the total gratuity of that love, and unfortunately, our resistance to that Good News.

I find that many Christians still have no knowledge of the soul's objective 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 or responsive people.

How do you ever undo such foundational damnation?

How do we let go of these images of hell that have nothing to do with the Good News and grace that we have in Jesus?

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 anthropology of the human person, and it just does not work. Such traditions produce few mystics and universal lovers. 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, the word sin has so many unhelpful connotations that it's very problematic today. For most of us "sin" does not connote what it really is: the illusion of separateness from God and from our original identity, our True Self. Most people think of sin as little naughty behaviors or any personal moral "stain" we suffer by reason of our bad thoughts, words, or deeds.

However, the Apostle Paul makes clear that sin is mostly an entrapment, or what many would now call an addiction. Jesus seems to primarily see it as a blindness that traps us in self-destructive behaviors and hard-heartedness. Thus he is always healing blind people and challenging people who see themselves as superior to others.

What we call sins are usually more symptoms of sin and not an inner negative nature of humanity itself. Furthermore, what we call sins often have more to do with stupidity and ignorance than actual malice. Disconnected people will surely do stupid things and even become malicious, but they did not start there. They began in union with God, but disunion became their experienced lie and defense.

This sounds terrible but it will help you get the point: most people are just stupid more than formally sinful. Anything that is cut off festers and fumes and attacks, while often hoping to regain acceptance. Remember the primary meaning of sin is to live outside "the garden," or in the smoldering garbage dump of Gehenna, below and outside the city walls of Jerusalem. These are the standing Biblical images of hell or separation from God's reality that I described earlier. Sin is primarily living outside of union. It is

a state of separation, when the part poses as the Whole. It's the loss of any inner experience of who you are in God. Using the words of Jesus that we heard earlier, our actions, our hands, our feet, and our eyes, these external experiences of stupidity lead us away from our inner experience of union with God.

Now, as we replace this 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, we can't accomplish or work up to union with God, because we've already got it. "Before the world began we all were chosen, chosen in Christ to live through love in his presence". Again, we cannot ever become worthy by ourselves. We can only reconnect to our Infinite Source.

The biblical revelation is about awakening, not accomplishing. It is about realization, not performance. And, we cannot **get** there, we can only **be** there. That foundational Being-in-God is for some reason too hard to believe, too good to be true. Only the humble can receive it and surrender to it, because it affirms much more about God than it does about us. And we foolishly believe it should be "all about me"! But, it is not.

God loves us and created us to be in union. My prayer is that we live into this truth.