

Hellish Indifference

Luke 16:19-31

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In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. Luke 16:23

Next time you're in Singapore you might want to visit one of the most popular tourist attractions in the city, "The Ten Courts of Confucian Hell." It's a favorite stopover for Malaysian parents who are attempting to teach their children the difference between right and wrong. I quote here from a magazine account: "Statues of demons stand at the gate, and visitors pass through dark, spooky rooms filled with sculptures depicting liars having their tongues pulled out, prostitutes boiled in oil, drug dealers chained to hot pillars on which they are slowly cooked, and stones grinding up people who have cheated on taxes or disobeyed their parents."¹

Yes, "*or disobeyed their parents.*" I wonder if Malaysian parents have much sassy back-talk from little Johnny after a visit to such a theme park. What might they say when their little boy gets unruly? "Johnny, remember last summer? Remember our little visit to the Ten Courts?" I wonder if parents get much mileage from this hellish field trip.

We know better than to leave such religious manipulation to the Confucians. Christians have creatively used hell in a variety of ways down through the centuries. Martin Luther himself threw an inkpot at the devil one trying evening, and he surely assumed a literal locus of torment in his writings. In 1741, Jonathan Edwards preached one of the most famous American sermons ever delivered to his New England congregation, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," using memorable imagery of fire and eternal condemnation to awaken his indifferent listeners. And who can forget Karl Malden in the old Disney classic, *Pollyanna*? Malden plays a preacher whose thunderous refrain, "Death comes unexpectedly," shook the chancel chandelier and made one summer Sunday seem as hot as Hades.

And modern preachers, of course, are not altogether immune from religious coercion. It dawns on me that today's Gospel lesson concerning the respective fates of a rich man and a poor man usually falls right around the Fall Stewardship campaign for us Lutherans.

Your financial pledges, in other words, will soon be due. But I won't go there. Maybe in white-hot anger you've completely lost it and invited someone to "go to hell." Maybe they stole your parking space or manipulated your inheritance. Or perhaps someone has failed to mince any words and specifically invited *you* to reside there warmly, eternally. What do we really mean when we say this? What do we really believe about this four-letter expletive, this biblical resting (or better put, *writhing*) place?

It may not surprise you to learn that many Christians no longer believe in hell. Every ten years or so *The Lutheran* magazine conducts a poll about the afterlife, and the last one reported that only sixty percent of Lutherans believe in a literal and

everlasting place of torment. That leaves a lot of Lutherans who don't—about two million descendants of the inkpot-throwing Luther—who believe these biblical threats are largely metaphorical. It would be interesting to conduct our own Ebenezer Lutheran Church poll.

Lately, Protestants tend to disbelieve in a literal hell, but still embrace a literal heaven. I'm not sure what that means. Someone has said that Lutherans, with our special emphasis on grace, are "creeping universalists," which may suggest a conviction that God is capable of forgiving just about anything.

Jesus tells a story today that seems to assume a literal and pictorially graphic peek into hell. All sorts of arresting little details cry out for our attention. A rich guy looks up from his hot perch and sees poor Lazarus by "the side" of Abraham, or literally, "the bosom of Abraham," in the Greek and in the old King James Version. I used to sing a little camp song about resting in such a soft place. But down through the years this detail has troubled biblical fundamentalists—people who've wondered just where in the world Abraham's "bosom" actually was. A fundamentalist would only include card-carrying disciples of Jesus in heaven, you see, so Abraham's presence there is quite troubling for some. Will a Jewish Hall of Famer like old Abraham be "grandfathered" in, so to speak? I recently read about a group of concerned folk who grant old Abe special status and assign him to a state of quasi-limbo between heaven and hell, and his bosom as a "subdivision" of that limbo.² But I digress.

For my money, the most interesting detail of this old story is that one can *actually peek* from one locale across "a great chasm" to another. The rich guy *sees* Lazarus living it up in heaven. And, presumably, Lazarus can see the thirsty rich guy who isn't asking for much—just a drop of water on a parched tongue. Well, no can do. Someone once wryly noted that the only thing that might eclipse the satisfaction of *knowing* an enemy is in hell is to actually *see* them there. This old story assumes such a possibility. A close atheist friend, not an enemy, named Andy, once told me with a smile, "Frank, if there is a hell and I go there, I hope you know about it." Yikes.

But what is the real nugget of truth in this story? Is Jesus trying to awaken the wealthy to the reality of poverty? On one level, I think the answer to that is decidedly "yes." I think he is. "For the love of money" says Paul to Timothy, "is a root of all kinds of evil." (He doesn't say money *is* evil, by the way, in an often-misquoted verse, but rather our love of it). "In their eagerness to be rich," Paul continues, "some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." I'm afraid that most comfortable North Americans like myself are precisely the ones the prophet Amos rails against when he says, "Alas for those who are at ease in Zion...Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches...but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!" (Makes you think twice about lounging on a couch of any kind, ivory or otherwise).

The rich man's sin in this story does not seem to be his wealth, really, but rather his *indifference* to the poor. Lazarus was at his gate every day, and the rich man could have done something about this hungry man covered with sores. This old story invites us to ask an obvious question: *Who are the poor at our very gate?* And what rationalizations do I use to keep myself apart from the modern Lazaruses all around us? This story undoubtedly was used by Jesus to arouse his followers to action and compassion. It is an invitation to examine closely the percentage of our incomes that we use directly to assist hungry people here and around the world. I'll say it again: this

man's sin is not that he was wealthy, but that he was *indifferent* to the needs of the poor. And that in itself becomes a certain sort of hell for those who drown in their own possessions.

But here's the curious thing about this story. In telling this parable about heaven and hell, you'd think it would be the perfect opportunity to turn up the heat, so to speak, to twist arms, lay on a warm coercion, to bring up the Ten Courts of Confucian Hell—whatever it takes to get one's attention. But the story does not really go there. "Let Lazarus go back and warn my brothers," says this tormented rich man. Now don't you think that might get their attention? Wouldn't that convince you to part with some of *your* wealth, much like the old Dickens tale where ghosts are sent back to warn the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge? It worked in that story, but Jesus won't allow it here. He won't *use hell* to scare the hell out of people. I admit that the overall effect of this story might do just that, but Jesus doesn't tell the story that way.

Maybe Jesus knew that true change, lasting transformation, *real love of neighbor*, is never realized through fear, intimidation, or threat. You can also conclude the opposite: people don't really change through the promise of heaven, getting a cookie at the end of time. That is why you will never see Jesus on *Hollywood Squares* or Jay Leno or David Letterman. Now what do I mean by that? Jesus himself (with tongue in cheek, quoting Abraham) says it well: "They have Moses and the prophets. If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced *even if someone rises from the dead*." Would it help convince people if the once-dead Jesus appeared, smiling and gregarious, on *Hollywood Squares*? I somehow doubt it.

So go figure. This story is all about hell, but Jesus won't use hell to scare the hell out of people. Our Lord points us to the prophets. He points us to Moses. In other words, he points us to our own Bibles, that book on all of our shelves called Holy. And he seems to say, "Open it, if you want to be changed."

Jesus knew. The threat of hell will not change us. And ditto the promise of heaven. But perhaps something will. As we immerse our lives in this old story, allowing the pages of Scripture to shape and form us over time, something happens. We slowly come to our senses in a world of much greed. With Jesus as our guide, we can say with Paul today: "For we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these." We open wide our hands once closed in fear, mistrust, and perhaps indifference—a hellish way to live. And perhaps, for the first time, we see a sister or brother, Lazarus at our gate.

Or, as a certain prophet once put it: Jesus at our gate.

Notes

1. Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 312-13. Norris is referencing a magazine article by Walter Russell Mead.
2. Alice K. Turner, *The History of Hell* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1993), 58.