

What do we say about hell?

Mark 9:38-50

A Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The gospel text for today mentions hell three times. Moreover, a footnote points out that two verses are omitted because they say the same thing. So, it could be said that this text it talks about hell five times. The word used here is "*Gehenna*," which is what we normally mean by "hell." It isn't the word, "Hades," which can mean "death."

Among us today it is widely considered bad taste to talk about hell. You just don't mention it unless in cursing or telling jokes. It's impolite. If you do talk about hell, people will think: "You're a fundamentalist. You're backward. You're superstitious."

Because of this social taboo about hell, we pretend that hell, like death, is not something we have to bother with. We try not to think about it. We think that if we don't think about it, then it magically is not a problem, which is one way we deny the problem and fool ourselves.

We know there are depictions of hell in literature and the arts. Back in the Fourteenth Century, Dante wrote his epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*. In the first part, *Inferno*, hell is depicted as nine concentric circles of torment going down to the center of the earth. One must go through hell in order to recognize and reject sin. Hell is about purging sin from oneself.

We know other religions talk about hell-like conditions. In Hinduism life is about rewards and punishments. If you are good, you go up the ladder. If you are bad, you go down the ladder. Karma will settle the score if you hurt others. The human task is to do more good than harm, even if that takes more than four hundred million years to escape Karma.

And there are even depictions of hell in pop culture. For example, in the 1993 movie, *Groundhog Day*, weatherman Phil must live the same day, Groundhog Day, over and over until he makes the right choices. He had to go through hell, so to speak. Hell is living the same nightmare day over and over again until you get it right.

For the Jehovah's Witnesses, all those outside of their kingdom, are annihilated. For Mormons there is no hell, just degrees of heaven. It ends up that there is no real hell.

Someone has even said that if there is a hell, no one is in it.

That captures the spirit of our day; tolerance is everything. It's like the tongue-in-cheek sign on the seminary professor's door: "God is nice, we're nice, isn't that nice?" Today we could

transpose this into saying: God is tolerant, we are tolerant, and tolerance is the ultimate good and a sign of our virtue.

The consequence of this kind of thinking is that if everything is tolerated, there is no meaning. Anything goes.

In this view the Christ event is merely a show or demonstration of God's love. Of course, this idea isn't new. Back in the Middle Ages, Abelard, the great Christian thinker said the cross itself is an illustration of God's love. What the cross did, and that includes all that happened leading up to it and after it, is God that is showing: "You thought I was against you, but I really love you." It's just a show demonstrating his love rather than his wrath.

To say that everything is a show exposes two huge questions:

The first question is: What about justice? Where do we sort out all the real injustices? Do we just say that nothing matters? That doesn't work because then there is no meaning whatsoever. As Karl Popper, the famous mathematician and scientist, said: "If everything is true, nothing is true."

The second question: What about forever?

The basic problem is that **we think we decide**. We think that we are smart and able to choose from the cafeteria of options the world presents to us. But that is breaking the first commandment, and that is original sin.

We're not so different from the ancient Greek sophists. "Sophism" means "I am wise." We think that, too: "We are wise." One of the ancient Greek sophists, Protagoras, said: "Man is the measure of all things." Whatever individuals deem to be true for them is "Truth." Plato, of course, rejected Protagoras.

What do we say to all this? You will not be surprised to hear: The cross is the answer. Sin, death, and the devil are all one. Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death." Hebrews 2:14: ". . . he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage."

Death is not a trifle. Sin and evil are not trifles. The cross and resurrection is not a show.

I John 4:10: "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to give his life as a sacrifice for us (to be the expiation for our sins)." That's very serious. Or Luke 10:18 says: "I saw Satan falling like lightning from heaven." On the cross Satan is defeated, conquered.

Or in Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13 about the temptation of Jesus by the devil: Jesus conquers him. Jesus overcomes him. There is a real battle going on. That's what is happening also in all those times when he heals those possessed by demons. There is a real battle; this is not a charade or a show.

The same is true for us. We think it's our job to interpret the cross, but, as Gerhard Forde points out: The cross interprets us. What does it say? Three things:

First, the cross says that the problem of evil, sin, and death is so serious that the only way it could be handled is by God himself.

Second, this is the way he handled it, and it's not something that we can manage, or get around, or interpret away.

Third, it's handled. As John 19:30 says: "It is finished."

What do we, Lutherans in the Twenty-First Century, say about hell? We say that for those who are in Christ Jesus, hell is taken care of. The power of the evil one, like sin and death, has been taken care of. Christ did it for us. That is the great message and comfort of the Gospel, the Good News, that in him we have release, freedom, and life. We are in him forever, and that equals heaven. Amen