

Sermon: What the Hell?

Scripture: Mark 9:38-50

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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Before I begin my sermon I just want to take minute to encourage you at this juncture in the life of this church - with my just coming on as your lead Pastor and the great youth and family programs that Ben and others are developing and the always powerful music program here - to invite someone in your wider circles to come to church with you. I know many of us more liberal Christian folk are a little hesitant to do anything that seems like evangelizing, but there just might be someone in your larger group of friends or acquaintances who right now is in need of a spiritual home, a community of faith, a church connection and this great place might just be exactly what they need and all it takes is an invitation from you. Just consider that God's Spirit could be nudging them and awaiting you to offer the welcome, to be a host, and invite them into God's church here at First Congregational. Let's celebrate and appreciate the blessing that is our faith community here in God's church and turn ourselves outward to receive those who need to be a part of us. OK? Can I hear an amen?

So that being said I want to talk about going to Hell! How's that for a segue? As my kids would say "awkward". And it is a bit awkward in no small part because you actually don't know my theology very well yet. You trusted that the 9 people on the search committee found someone who would at least not promote teachings and doctrines that are at odds with what most of you generally believe. And although we place a high premium on freedom of thought and individual conscience before God and one another, there are certain fundamentals of Christian theology that I think would cause a problem for you if I as your pastor espoused them from up here in this pulpit. And God sending people to hell is one of them. Am I correct? I think we'd have a problem if I suddenly got up here and got all fire and brimstone on ya! I mean I can get my southern accent on and I was raised down in VA on just this side of the Bible Belt, Southern Baptist ya'll might know? But never fear, your search

committee did its job and they did ask me about my theology and trusted that they weren't hiring a fundamentalist preacher for you.

So you will not hear me say from up here in this pulpit that a person must be Christian, must accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior in order to be saved from Hell in the afterlife. I just don't buy it and I won't be selling it. But we cannot ignore the fact that this particular way of thinking is prevalent in the Christian world and is so clearly and convincingly articulated by fundamentalist Christians that many people in the world and in our immediate culture believe it is part and parcel of what it means to be Christian. "Oh, you're a Christian? Then you must believe I am damned to Hell for not being one." Fundamentalist Christianity has done such an effective job at promoting this particular stream of thought that I would guess that even many of us progressive Christians have come to question whether we should legitimately call ourselves Christian because we don't believe that Jesus is all about saving souls from Hell. What?! It might even be why some of us are hesitant to invite our friends to church... because then it reveals that we go to church and if people knew we went to church they might think that we think and believe: them damned to Hell, that homosexuality is a sin, that we are uncomfortable with cursing. Strange, I know but isn't that the truth of the matter? Amazing how often when someone realizes that I am a pastor their first response is to cover their mouths if they say a curse word; that and narrow views on hell and homosexuality is what comes to mind instead of for instance an immediate response that could be like "oh wow, this is a Christian, someone who cares about the poor and prisoners and disenfranchised, who is a proponent for justice and peace." It's a shame isn't it... although hooray for Pope Francis who in a short time has done wonders for reminding the world that's what Christians are about.

When I worked at a psychiatric clinic in CT for a number of years I would always pass by this little Bible Church in Watertown that looked all sweet tucked up there in the rolling hills of CT with this beautiful stone wall running along side it and these glorious maple trees and I was always interested to pass it because I wanted to see what the placard out by the road would say leading up to a particular Sunday. The four phrases I can remember well on their sign were - "Hell is Hotter than

Watertown in the Summer!" "The Devil is alive and well in Watertown!" "Stop, Drop and Roll, doesn't work in Hell". And finally "Where are we going and how did we get in this handbasket?" I mean, it just got my day started on the right foot driving by those signs! I did wonder at times who in fact did drive by, see those placards and say "I want to go to church this Sunday! I want to be a Christian." I don't know Winchester very well but I wonder how a banner would go over like that out on our front lawn. You know "The devil is alive and well in Winchester! Worship at 10am."

So this is what they see and hear of us. And ironically it's simply not true to biblical Christianity – the whole hellfire and brimstone scenario, at the very least the weight that is placed on such a theology is way out of proportion to what the scriptures emphasize. So through our passage of scripture this morning, even this scripture which does not seem to mince words about Hell and how you better be careful or you'll go there after you die, I hope to demonstrate this to you, that it's a distortion of Jesus' point and in fact turns his point exactly 180 degrees in the wrong opposite direction.

So check it out with me. We have to hear this passage in context of what has come before. So remember what Judy preached on last week; in the passages just before this one the disciples are arguing with one another about who is the greatest – "I'm the best, no I'm the best, no I'm the best and you're the worst! You're the worst, I'm the best." And Jesus is like "What the Hell, you guys?!" If you really want to be first be last cause the last will be first and the first last." The disciples are vying for privilege and power and insider status over and against one another and Jesus tells them in no uncertain words to can it!

But the disciples apparently learned absolutely nothing from this lesson because immediately after they come running up to Jesus and are like "Jesus there was this guy over there who was casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he's not one of us!" The disciples are particularly chaffed by this because they had trouble casting the demon out of a boy just a chapter before and Jesus had to do it himself. So when they see this outsider, this stranger, this nobody casting out demons, the heck if they are going to allow him to get in on their serious disciple business! Once again "we are in, you are out, we're the best, you are not as

good as us', I mean, really natural human responses that we can identify with, but that Jesus confronts at every single turn time and time again. And so not surprisingly Jesus says "leave him alone, if he is not against us he is for us and even the simplest act of kindness will be rewarded. Stop trying to complicate this! You give someone a cold glass of water and you are my disciple." And the disciples are like "darn it!"

So that's what precedes this passage when Jesus brings up the whole hellfire and brimstone line of thinking. "Cut your foot off if you have to for it's better to go into life lame than into hell with two feet!" Jesus is definitely speaking with fire and really not mincing words here, that's for sure. But what he is not doing is referencing the after-life, he is not suddenly threatening eternal damnation to bad people and salvation to good people. That would make absolutely no sense whatsoever! So then we ask what is Jesus getting at here?

A good place to start is to look at the word itself that we translate as Hell and that has all that afterlife baggage of eternal punishment loaded onto it and crushing it down to a tiny little charred nugget of a concept, when in fact the Greek word is SO much bigger and nuanced and overflowing with history and imagery. The word that the Gospel of Mark uses in Greek that we translate as Hell is the word Gehenna, which was – believe it or not - a place you go in the afterlife where lives a red devil and fire and a lot of suffering people who haven't accepted Jesus.

Instead it referenced on one hand during Jesus' time a great dump just outside of Jerusalem where all the city's trash went and literally was forever burning and smoking and rotting and stinking. It was like Jerusalem's version of the Winchester Transfer Station, just not as neatly run, organized, sanitized and euphemized. But Gehenna was also more than that. Jesus' first century Mediterranean Jewish listeners would have heard his mention of Gehenna and they would have imagined the valley beside ancient Jerusalem, in the time of the prophet Jeremiah, where followers of Ba'al and followers of other Canaanite gods would go to sacrifice their children to the gods. So you see Hell was not a place where God sent bad people as a punishment. It was not the torture chamber of God's violence toward sinners, it was a place of great human violence towards one another and the

earth herself. Hell was about human sacrificial violence, not God's violence. Please! Hell spoke volumes about human nature not about God's nature. C'mon! Hell was human-created not God-designed. Good gracious!

And so Jesus is not making a comment on afterlife destinations but rather on our violent sacrificial tendencies towards one another. That we sacrifice others for our own advancement is such a fundamental sin in our human being that it might even be considered the original sin. Why did you eat the apple Adam? Because she told me to do it! Blame her, take her, punish her! And she says - because the snake told me to do it! Punish hi! And God asks why did you kill your brother Cain - because you favored him and I wanted to be favored! And Jesus asks why did you want to exclude the man healing in my name - because he is not one of us and we are deserving and he is not! And God asks why do you think I send some people to Hell after death? Always this belief that sacrifice of another is necessary for the protection, advancement of ourselves. And Jesus says that is the way to Gehenna my friends, that is why there is a Gehenna in the first place, your violence, your lifting up of yourself at the expense of others. And so Jesus says "if anything you sacrifice yourself your own hand, your own foot, your own eye and choose life rather than create Gehenna.

This is so much more central to Christianity than any theology of heaven and hell - The image, the memory, the moment in human history where Jesus, the ultimate, quintessential innocent was hung on the cross, suffering and dying, condemned by the religious of the day and executed by the state, calls into question forever and ever more our depraved human tendency to secure and advance ourselves at the expense of others! It is at play on the international stage when we bomb another country for the threat they pose to us and it is at play on the interpersonal stage when we sidle up to someone and connect to them by speaking badly of another. And the cross is there as this constant and niggling reminder that it is such a pervasive human tendency that we even did it to God Godself! And our salvation is about the unhinging of our sacrificial systems and practices, that we create Hell when we ensure our own security and privilege by the sacrificing of others.

One of the Pope's American heroes that he mentioned before Congress on Thursday was a monk named Thomas Merton. Let me just end by quoting Merton in what he says about the way we have distorted the Christian message:

A great blasphemy occurs when Christians make the cross contradict mercy! This is of course the ultimate temptation of Christianity! To say that Christ has locked all the doors, has given one answer, settled everything and departed, leaving all of life enclosed in the frightful consistency of a system outside of which there is only damnation, inside of which there is the intolerable flippancy of the saved and then no where is there anywhere left for the mystery of the freedom of divine mercy and its only divine mercy that is truly serious and worthy of being taken seriously. God is nothing unless God is mercy upon mercy upon mercy!

To say that Christ has locked all the doors and given one answer, to say that unless you believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God and savior of all you are damned to hell is blasphemy against God! That is about our lack of mercy and our limited compassion and our vying for power and position and says nothing about God who is mercy upon mercy upon mercy.

May we here be a place of God's mercy where compassion and welcome and self-sacrifice reign supreme in Jesus name, amen!