

Towson Presbyterian Church

February 16, 2020

Rev. Joel Strom

Matthew 25:31-46

“We Make the Road By Walking” – Ch. 24: “Jesus and Hell”

Brian begins chapter 24 by naming some of the common caricatures that describe Jesus as well, kind of boring. He walked around in freshly washed and pressed robes...in pastel colors, his hair flowing behind him. Or he's holding a sheep in one hand and raising the other as if hailing a taxi. Another caricature is that he was simply part of this mathematical equation, which can then disregard what he said and how he lived. He was a part of this - and Brian's phrase here is a “cosmic calculus” - which decided who was in and who was out in the next life.

The Jesus that we find in the stories of the Bible was so much more than those caricatures. He was also extremely subversive and incredibly challenging in how he was calling his followers to live, with today's scripture reading a prime example.

This story of the sheep and the goats, I'm guessing makes you a little uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable. Jesus speaks of a time when he has come back – it's a future setting – and he is separating the sheep – those who have fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, gave clothes to the naked, welcomed the stranger and visited the convicted in prison – separating them from the goats, which are those who *have not* fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger and visited the imprisoned. And what's even more challenging, and jarring, and frankly *scary*, is the language Jesus uses to describe the separating of the sheep and goats. The sheep are led into eternal life and the goats depart into the *eternal fire*, prepared for the devil and his angels, for *eternal punishment*.

What do we do with this kind of language? What do we do with the idea that after we die some people go to heaven and others go to hell where not only is there eternal separation from God, but there's torture and punishment and suffering...forever? And God is the one who is not only allowing it, but also causing it? I'm grateful that Brian gave a chapter to this in “We Make the Road By Walking.” It's uncomfortable to talk about it, but we also need to talk about it.

When I was sixteen, my best friend, Darin, invited me to a Christian camp in New Hampshire. It was two weeks long, and for a week and a half I went through all the motions. I participated in all the bible studies and chapel gatherings at night, but really, I was there to have fun. And we gave our counselor a run for his money – let's just say we pushed the boundary of what we could get away with right up to the edge. It's very humbling for me to say this now since I've been working with teens for many years, and they can sure sometimes push right up to the edge of that boundary with me. But not our teens here 😊...previous churches.

For a week and a half, I had fun, and we could say I put with the religion that was being discussed every day. I wasn't against it – it was just part of the week. But as we got to Wednesday and Thursday, what the camp was saying about God's love and forgiveness and my need to accept God's love, and if didn't I was saying no to God and yes to hell, it started to find a way in and connect with me. The speakers at night in our Chapel gatherings and the conversations I'd have every day, one-on-one with our counselor, I started to listen. And on Friday night, the last night of camp, as we sat in the dimly-lit chapel, the speaker describing God's love and forgiveness and the invitation to accept that forgiveness, when prompted to stand up as a sign that you wanted that forgiveness in your life...I stood up.

And it was a powerful moment for me – no question about it. When I look back on it, I remember feeling some-thing. God was real in a whole new way in that moment. Prior to that God was an idea, and God was distant. God was up there, over there, some-where else, but that night God was right here and extremely present. It was a powerful moment for me. I felt God's love and acceptance like I never had before.

But as I laid down that night to go to sleep, I also remember a feeling of *relief*. Relief that if I died that night I wouldn't go to hell. Mixed within the euphoria of that night and laying right next to the love and forgiveness I felt was also this relief that my eternal destination was secure.

The Bible doesn't actually have a whole lot to say about the afterlife, and specifically "hell." The Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, describes a place called "Sheol," which is not a description for hell as we think of it, but it simply describes a place where you go after you die. Sheol is almost like the Catholic understanding of purgatory – it's this in-between state. The Hebrew writers of the Old Testament were actually pretty vague about Sheol, and about the afterlife in general and about what happens to you after you die. I guess it wasn't of great concern to them.

In the New Testament when talking about the afterlife, we occasionally find the word "Hades," which comes from Greek mythology, and Hades is essentially the Hebrew word for "Sheol." It was simply a place for those who had died. And then we get to the word "hell" in the New Testament, and hell is translated from the Greek word "Gehenna," and Gehenna was an actual physical location in Jerusalem. It was a valley on the south and west side of the city and in Jesus's day it was the city dump. It was Jerusalem's main location for garbage, and there was a fire there that was constantly burning to consume the trash. When Jesus talks about hell in the New Testament, he's talking about a garbage pile.

So where do we get this idea of hell as a place of eternal torture and punishment? For that, I think we have to thank Dante, the 14th century Italian writer and his "Divine Comedy," which describes Dante's journey through hell, where demons torture and punish people for eternity. The Divine Comedy is a horrific description and it's here, with Dante, that we get our understanding as hell as this place where people go - this place that God sends people to, where there is eternal torture and punishment.

Let's pause for a moment and take a step back and I invite you to think about this with me... how is it possible that God can be understood as a being that sends people to hell for eternal torture? In this understanding of hell, how do we describe God on one hand as all-loving and all-merciful, as we do, and simultaneously someone who condemns someone to an eternity of torture? How can those two beliefs coexist with one another? I don't know how they do. I don't know how God can be all-loving and then at the same time a being that would authorize eternal punishment and torture. Because then how then do ever get to a place where we actually trust God and actually love God? How do we ever get there, when we're always somewhat afraid of God, and the idea of hell and torture and torment are always in the back of our minds?

It was Jesus who said love your enemies, but apparently God is not capable of that? Peter comes to Jesus in Matthew 18 and says, "Lord, how many times should I forgive someone who sins against me? Is 7 times good?" Jesus replies, "No, not 7 times, but 77 times," which means we don't stop forgiving. We never stop forgiving. But apparently God's not capable of what Jesus is asking us to do?

We, TPC, describe God as a being who possesses unending love for you and for me and for all of creation. That is the Good News that we proclaim and announce and live here at TPC. And it's a Good News that at times even makes us uncomfortable. It occasionally made everyone around Jesus uncomfortable, his disciples, religious leaders, because Jesus constantly pointed to people who everyone thought God couldn't possibly love and said, "*Yup, God loves them just as much as you. I know, but you're so much better, but that's not how God's love works.*"

There is no end to God's goodness and mercy and forgiveness and acceptance, so what is Jesus talking about when he talks about hell?

When you read the passages where Jesus used the word "hell," what's interesting is that he's not talking about *believing* – and believing the right or wrong things. He's not talking about beliefs as we think of them. He's talking about people's hearts and what's happening within them, and how they are looking at the world around them, and what they see when they look at their neighbors, and how they are treating and caring for their neighbors.

This story in particular, about the sheep and the goats, says nothing about believing the right things. Instead, it's actually the opposite. It's about our actions and our compassion, and it's about the lens through which we see people. Jesus looks out into the world and sees suffering – he sees the hungry, the thirsty, he sees those in prison and says, "*Those are my people who I love, and I want them to be your people, too.*" This story, which at first seems to be about judgment and separation, is actually about Jesus's love and compassion for the world, and our invitation to view and care for the world in the same way.

But then why the strong language that he uses? Well, some words need to be intense and loaded and maybe a little offensive to get a point across, especially if it's of the utmost

importance to Jesus and his message. At the end of this chapter Brian says that the real purpose of Jesus' fire and brimstone language was "*not to predict the destruction of the universe or to make absolute for all eternity the insider-outsider categories of us and them. Its purpose was to wake up complacent people, to warn them of the danger of their current path, and to challenge them to change—using the strongest language and imagery available.*"

Whatever is said about Jesus, what cannot be said is that he was boring, nor is the journey of following him and slowly learning what it means to love God and love our neighbors.

And that's what slowly happens in us when we decide to orient our lives around Jesus of Nazareth. We embark on a journey of *learning how to love*, and it begins by knowing that God loved you fiercely and passionately yesterday, and today, and will tomorrow, and the next day and the next day and the next day.

Friends, we have an identity here at TPC, a God-given calling and mission, to share God's love with the world, to share God's unending and infinite love with the world.

God's love for the world.

God's love.

Thanks be to God.