

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 p.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – July 30, 2017

“Heaven before Hell”

Scripture: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52; 8 Pentecost A (Proper 12)

So this is the second Sunday in a row that Jesus warns us of the furnace of fire and “...weeping and gnashing of teeth.” I guess he’s on to something. And with the weather having been so warm lately, almost downright hot, if I had been a little more on my toes, I would have turned off the air conditioner in here this morning just to add to the experience, because I suppose now is as good a time as any to talk about... hell!

Personally I’m no fan of teeth gnashing. Makes me think of a pack of ravenous wolves snarling and curling back their jowls and snapping their big fangs while fighting over a kill. Or what I want to do when the dentist brings the drill closer and closer to my teeth. Clenched jaws, curled lips, pain, fear. This doesn’t sound so good to me. Hell is clearly not a place I want to be.

But did you notice that Jesus takes his time to get around to all the weeping and gnashing? Long before we feel the heat of the furnace, Jesus first speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven, and what he describes is clearly good and desirable. In the

Kingdom of Heaven, even the tiniest of blessings grows into the greatest of gifts. From just one mustard seed, only the size of a dot on the tip of one's finger, an entire shrub grows to provide cool lodging and shade and safety for God's creatures. Only a touch of yeast in nearly a bushel of flour and loaf after loaf of bread rises to feed those who are hungry. It's worth giving everything that one has just to acquire that tiny treasure or that single, yet perfect pearl which is heaven. And the trade brings only joy.

But isn't it interesting that the Kingdom of Heaven takes in everything, yet not everything can remain a part of the Kingdom of Heaven? The net catches all manner of fish, but not all manner of fish are suited for staying caught. There's something about it, something about heaven, that embraces what is good but does not sustain what is evil. If there is no joy, no abundance, no generosity, no goodness, then it's not heaven. If there is pain, anger, weeping and gnashing of teeth, then it's not heaven.

Now a lot of Christians make a big to-do about hell, so much so that, listening to them, you would think the Christian faith is largely about avoiding hell rather than sharing in heaven. Let's just take the joy out of things, why don't we?... focus on the fear of hell, keep our heads down, do what the preacher says, and hope for the best, because, let me tell you, hell is where we belong. But Jesus didn't start with hell. He

says, “The Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” You’re going to want to be a part of this. That’s why he lived... to reveal the nature of heaven. The just, decent, loving, truthful, faithful, even sometimes-suffering way that leads to wholeness, hope, peace of spirit... the way that leads to life.

I think we in the Episcopal Church have a pretty good grip on hell. And I don’t mean like we want to hold onto it. I took a look at our church’s catechism in the Book of Common Prayer, just to see what it says about hell, you know... to get the company line. And the first thing I noticed is that hell doesn’t even make the page until the very end of our catechism. And I don’t think that’s for the sake of denial. Rather just as Jesus begins with heaven, just as he teaches love and goodness and joy and humility and service to others, and eventually acknowledges that there’s a cost for NOT living this way, that not all manner of behavior is fit for his kingdom, our church begins from God’s goodness in a good creation, and it hopes for a renewed and reconciled life beyond the bounds of time. In fact, hell is mentioned under the topic of “The Christian Hope.” [BCP, page 861].

Q. What is the Christian hope?

A. The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purpose for the world.

Q. What do we mean by heaven and hell?

A. By heaven, we mean eternal life in our enjoyment of God; by hell, we mean eternal death in our rejection of God.

- Q. What do we mean by everlasting life?
- A. By everlasting life, we mean a new existence, in which we are united with all the people of God, in the joy of fully knowing and loving God and each other.
- Q. What, then, is our assurance as Christians?
- A. Our assurance as Christians is that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

How much better that sounds to me than all that "...weeping and gnashing of teeth." I'm glad Jesus takes the time to teach us the difference between what is good and life-giving and what is evil and cannot last. I'm glad we've been, well, warned.

Now, some might feel I have been somewhat glib about what is an entirely serious subject. But, really, I only want to give heaven its due. Whatever we might feel or believe about the reality of hell ---hell as a place of eternal damnation, or as a metaphor for punishment, or as a state of being or not being--- Jesus first leads me to understand that heaven is his will for me, for you, and for everyone else. *"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:17).* See, I don't simply wish to avoid hell, rather I want to live now in the manner and hope of heaven. I fail sometimes, maybe often, in the attempt. We all will. But we try it again, because practice makes perfect. Yet every day I feel as though so many people, professed Christians included, are practicing up for what it must be like to live in hell... where there is weeping and constant gnashing of teeth.

Look, while I believe we Christians indeed have our mythologies, Christianity is no myth. We are here. The church is present and proclaiming the presence of God with us in Jesus, a man who lived upon the earth, flesh and blood and spirit like us all. He taught the people what God was like, and he lived what he taught. When Jesus spoke to the people in his day, when he comforted and blessed the poor and the hungry and the sad and the outcast, he didn't do it from the distance of the heavens. He did it right here with his hands, his feet, his voice, his spit, his sweat, his body, his very life. And when he spoke about hell, when he warned the dishonest, the cruel, the careless rich, the faithless leaders, he did it here with his hands, his feet, his voice, his spit, his sweat, his body, his very life. His blessings and his warnings grow not out of some arbitrary likes and dislikes, but from the earnest and faithful experience of the inequities of human life, the injustice human beings often wreak upon each other, the need for help and service and love, and the hope that God is making things right with us and through us. Hell is indeed often of our own making. And it will not stand. So let's do what we can *NOT* to cooperate with it. And if there is one constant argument against the existence of the eternal hell of the Christian fundamentalist and others who have so popularized punishment as God's most steady attribute, it is the overwhelming, saving love of God exhibited by the one we call God's son. *Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.* Jesus reminds us that it's about the Kingdom of Heaven long before it's about hell.