

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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Hell and Social Media

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The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 16:19-31*

Here is my real problem with social media. I don't care what a lot of people think about certain issues. I try to, but when I read a tweet of someone's views on a particular subject, I find myself thinking, "Well, what does she know about that subject anyway" or "Well, his ridiculous opinion plus \$2.01 will get him a tall cup of coffee at Starbucks." I know that my attitude about this means that I am a dinosaur on some level and certainly not riding the wave of the future, but it is the truth. Your allowing me a platform to get that off my chest this morning is very therapeutic. So thank you. I do also want you to know if a person were sitting across from me, opining about some issue, particularly in even a quasi-pastoral way, I'd be interested, I really would, or I'd do a heck of a job pretending to be.

The passage we have just heard is one that elicits strong reactions and opinions about a number of topics, hell being one of them—which is what brings me to social media. Tooling around the Internet while writing—research, not procrastination—I decided to see what most Episcopalians think about hell. I came upon several sites that included comments from various social media either from or about Episcopalians on the topic. Some of the comments were maddening: "Episcopalians believe the bible—or say they do; they just have about as many ways of understanding it as there are Episcopalians." On a side note, I don't think this person, identified as "The Dark Side," meant this as a compliment, but I take it as one. Every person reading and studying the bible understands it through his/her own lens. The trouble comes when we don't admit that truth, because without that concession we are in real trouble, thinking we can know for sure the final answer. But The Dark Side continued: "They (Episcopalians) believe almost anything, but they don't really like thinking about hell since they don't like to think about anything that isn't nice." Wrong. At that moment I was thinking something that was not nice. Another suggested that he would expect to "find Episcopalians all over the map on virtually every issue," but added, "well, not all over the map but all over the left side of it." Other entries were slightly kinder and more helpful but not quite as interesting.

So much for that. Most likely this story attributed to Jesus was a folk tale that was making the rounds during the time of Jesus' life. Hearing such stories, it seems, helped desperate people in their attempts to endure hideous circumstances at the present moment, which were not far from the extreme of poor Lazarus's life. Maybe not everyone had sores being licked by dogs, but life was incredibly hard. The chasm between the haves and have-nots was so deep and wide that, for the have-nots, imagining a total reversal in the next life was often the only way to endure the pain of the present. In the writings of the New Testament, there are two views of what happened to people upon their death, and each contained judgment. One view was that upon death, every one goes one direction or the other. Jesus said to the bandit on the cross next to him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." The other view of post-death details, more prominent actually in the New Testament, was the notion that immediately upon death everyone enters a period of extended rest, suspended space, until the Day of Judgment. On that day, often understood as the day when the Christ Triumphant returns, there will be a final accounting and all shall then be appropriately dispatched.

This tale seems to be more in the former camp: that there was no period of waiting: Lazarus, immediately in the lap of luxury; the Rich Man, writhing in hell as he deserved to be. What a story, and one that has lurked in our collective consciousness for millennia: Good people go to heaven; bad people go to hell.

Statistics show that by a huge percentage most Americans believe in the afterlife, not surprising given our religiosity. Also, even in 2013 there is the lingering assumption that how we act in this life determines how we shall live in the next one. For the record and for what that matters, such thinking is not true orthodoxy, certainly not Protestant orthodoxy, which holds that faith in grace saves, not works, not how we act. There are all sorts of machinations that get employed when one tries to put a fine point on this theology—questions such as would one act like that, in some egregious way, if he/she were really saved. And then, of course, we are off and running, lost in the never-ending pursuit

of who is in and who is out—the saved versus the unsaved—an obsession with Christianity for centuries. A less obvious extension of this kind of thinking, and I think probably even more deadly, is that it sets us up—you are welcome to argue with me—as judges ourselves. I believe such thinking inculcates within us a penchant for violent punishment here on earth. If our God actually conceived of and oversees a place of eternal damnation, what does that say about what we believe about the character of God? How does that relate to the wideness of God’s mercy, for which we long and about which we regularly sing? Does it leave in us questions about our essential acceptability before the God we seek? My experience as a priest and a struggler is that it does.

And there is yet another problem with our viewing this story as a reflection of what is to come for us in the next life. It places the emphasis upon individual salvation and misses the broader understanding that God is concerned with the transformation of the world, with the whole of creation, not just the individual. God’s plan is for all to be saved, for the entire world to be made whole and right with God. That is why what happens on the other side of the world, as well as just outside the gate of our homes, matters to us. Our loving actions are not required to save us from eternal punishment but to be a part of bringing the realm of God on earth, bringing a just world, right now in this place.

The surface lesson from this gospel story is actually quite clear and immensely valuable. The Rich Man, it turns out, was not as insulated as he thought from the poor man. His insouciance toward him, his failure even to see this human being, cost him his soul. Hell, it turns out, is a theological destination, not a geographical one. And it is a soulless place, a place where perspective is limited and sight is blinded, a place where feeling is truncated and self-centered, a place where accumulation means more than anything else. And when that becomes all there is to life, we lose the humanness that characterizes us as the children of the Divine.

While our faith does not give easy directions about how to do it, about how to live this life to which we are called, the message is clear. And I believe we know it in our souls: we are not made to live closed off, insulated lives, devoted purely to our own acquisitions and endeavors. The insidiousness of living such lives is that when we fail to see others in need wherever they are, we are made poorer by that failure to see, racked in some ways with poverty of spirit, deep poverty that slowly erodes our souls. A non-canonical saying of Jesus claims that “a person who sees his brother or sister sees God; a person who does not see his brother or sister does not see God.” For the Rich Man, Lazarus was the missed sacrament, the missed presence of God—and it was starving him to death.

The openness of the table around which we are about to gather symbolizes our humility before the wideness and generosity of God. We eat and drink here, not only or even primarily, to be full ourselves but to commit our selves and souls to the filling of the whole world.

In the name of God: *Amen.*