

### **Matthew 5:29-30**

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.\* 30And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

### **“Who Told Jesus to Go To Hell?”**

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Last week, if you were here, you may have noticed that we recited the Apostles' Creed. A lot of us had to learn that before we joined the church, and I added a line in that, that Jesus descended into hell. Some objected to that. We don't often add those words, but if you look at the back of the hymn book, where it says "Traditional Apostles' Creed" there's some footnotes. We believe in Jesus Christ, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, and he descended into hell." I've had to defend, all week, that addition, and understandably, we don't talk much about hell these days. Did Jesus believe in hell? He spoke of it, you heard the text. Did he think there was a place to go after death, to suffer for eternity? Did he think that? And today, the first Sunday of the month, children are here. We don't want to frighten our children, do we? Or their parents.

I think we've come to realize, if you look at the bulletin, that quote that's in the bulletin where it says Silent Preparation, from 1 John 4, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out our fear." But we've got to be realistic. There are fears, and some things in life, not all of it's good, some of it's quite bad. Several years ago, as we watched the flames spread and the buildings fall, a four-year-old little girl was told the terrorists really don't know us, and she said, "Well, maybe we should tell them our names."

Henry David Thoreau said, "Let us settle ourselves. Let us work and wedge our feet down and through the mud and slush of opinion, prejudice, tradition, delusion, and appearance, till we come to the hard bottom, which we can call reality." Reality. Today I want us to arrive at the hard bottom, which we can call reality, especially because there are children with us. Today I want to invite us to think about the worst. I'm reminded of the elderly woman sitting next to the preacher, you've heard the story, on an airplane that had flown into a terrible storm, and the plane was being bounced about, and she said to him, "Reverend, you're a man of God. Do something about this!" He looked at her and said, "Lady, you've got to know, I'm in sales, not management."

Well, today, let it be known that I'm in sales. I'm selling faith, not fear. I'm selling love, not judgment. I'm selling justice, not punishment. And perfect love, which is God, casts out fear. Is there hell? Yes. Where is it? Where in hell are we? For some of us, it's a place. Actually, that's where the idea started. There was this Valley of Hinnom. It was south of Jerusalem, and legend had it that in previous decades that's where they practiced child sacrifice to appease the gods. Whether that was rumor or not, it was a place of death and pain, a place of fire, a place to stay away from. It can be a place, other places like

that. A murder scene at a high school. A book depository in Dallas. A hotel kitchen in Los Angeles. A hotel balcony in Tennessee. I think of the death camps in Europe. I've been to Dachau, that's one of them. I've walked through the barracks. I've read the stories, how the prisoners had to tear down the old munitions plant, and then build up this death camp. They had to do it themselves. They were forced to. How it was located over a swampy wasteland, a terrible place, how roll call was every morning and night, just terrible. Beatings for the prisoners, especially those who tried to escape, and then the selections of the prisoners, which ones would go to the gas chambers. When you're in that place, and I know a number of you have been, it gets very quiet. It's hell. I think of Afghanistan and other parts of the middle east. Barbara Walters was interviewing some women and noticed that they always walked at least five steps behind their husbands. "How can you hold onto this custom of walking behind your husbands in a state of total subservience?" And the women looked at Barbara Walters and without hesitation they said, "Land mines."

Hell is a place, like Golgotha, the place of the skull, where Jesus was crucified on a hill, and the cross. For us, the cross is a symbol of life, not death. In the presence of Jesus, in the worst place, at the worst time, under the most terrible of circumstances. And Dachau. For reasons known only to the Gestapo, they'd made the determination to put all the clergy in the same cell block, all of them, two thousand, I think, over the years. There were rabbis, there were priests, there were Protestant pastors, and that's where they were, in this one cell block. And then in 1941, these clergy people built a chapel. I've seen the chapel. In 1941 in January, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January, that was when the first mass was conducted, and other worship services for other people of faith. God was present. For Christians, Jesus was present in that place. The worst it can be. Where is it for you? Maybe you're in it right now, sitting at a point in your life where you can't see the future is better than the present, and you know the future is going to be worse than the past. Or maybe at a stage in your life when you hear a diagnosis that gives you pause and brings you fear. Or maybe you've come to the end of your job and the end of your paycheck, and you see it coming, but you don't know where you're going. Or maybe you're in a nursing home where the payments are about to run out and you're worried if you'll die before they do, and you think about it, you really can't afford to live. There are places like that, locations, no exit. No way out. Endless hours. No friends, no hope, no way. Hell is the self alone. It's what we call reality, it's a place we could call hell. I believe it exists, and I believe somehow, Jesus is with us there, wherever that is.

Where in hell are we? You know, for some of us, it's not a place. Secondly, for some of us it's people. Other people. I'm doing a book review in August, a book about political campaigns, the worst political campaigns, written by Kerwin Swint. He writes about the campaign between Claude Pepper and George Smathers for the senate seat in Florida. Smathers gave a speech about his opponent in which he said, "Are you aware that Claude Pepper is known all over Washington as a shameless extrovert? Not only that, he has a brother who is a known homo sapien, and a sister who once was a thespian who worked in wicked New York City. And it is established fact that Mr. Pepper, before his marriage, habitually practices celibacy." The thing is, Smathers won, on the basis of that speech.

They tell a story about Sam Donaldson and his relationship with Jimmy Carter, when Jimmy Carter was president. Donaldson was especially difficult to President Carter. The two didn't like each other much, and Donaldson was traveling with the president to a small village near New Delhi, India, to see how the village had solved their energy problem. This particular village had dug a huge pit where they dumped all the cow manure from the herds and then siphoned off the methane gas to light up the village. And Carter and the town officials and Donaldson stood at the edge of the pit. And the reporter said to the president, "If I fall in, you would pull me out, wouldn't you, Mr. President?" "Certainly," Jimmy Carter answered, and then he paused, and then he said, "After a suitable interval."

Our church softball team plays its first game tomorrow at five-thirty. We are listed as just First United Methodist Church, FUMC. Other churches in the church league have more intimidating names. Tomorrow, for example, we play the Rockers. We could beat them. But then, we play the Untouchables. And then we play the Dogs. And then we play the Mixed Nuts. And then we play the Lumberjacks, and then we play the Bomb Squad, and then we play the Impacting Giraffes, and finally we wind up the first half of the season playing the Sphincters. We've got to get a menacing mascot, like that school in Delaware that used to be known as the Fighting Quakers. Maybe we could be the Mangling Methodists, or the Wild Wesleyans, or the Quarreling Quadrilateralists. It's other people.

For Jesus, it was the Pharisees. They drove him crazy. For Job, it was Bildad the Shuhite, and for Samson it was Delilah. We let them get at us. We listen to their criticisms. We begin to accept their prediction as prophecy from God. If Michelangelo had listened to his critics, he would have painted the floor of the Sistine Chapel. If Brother Lawrence had let himself be locked up washing dishes in the kitchen and would have listened to everything that they told about him, about how incompetent he was, and how they needed to keep him away from anybody who visited, then we would never know how to practice the presence of God. Jesus said, "You're the salt of the earth, you're the light of the world, and it's up to us to know it, and up to us to believe it. If other people tell us otherwise, we've got better wisdom from a higher source. It's the reason Jesus took the cup and the bread and said, "This is my body," as he broke the bread. "This cup is the new covenant, in my blood, take it into yourself, for I am with you even when you stand alone." Hell is other people, or hell is a place, for some of us.

A third factor: Is hell a punishment after death? If we're going to arrive at the bottom of life, we call reality, then it's got to be faced. C. S. Lewis once heard a preacher stumbling over the idea of hell after death in his sermon, the preacher said, "And now my friends, if you do not believe these truths, then maybe there is for you some grave eschatological consequence." Later, C. S. Lewis visited with the preacher and he said, "If you're talking about the danger of hell, then why don't you say so?" There's a man named Harold. He loved to read obituaries in the newspaper, and his friends knew it. So as a joke, they put his name and his picture and a write-up in the obituary page one day, and Harold picked up the paper and he turned to the obituary page, and he saw his name, and he read his biography, and looked at his photograph, and he called one of his friends who was in on this. "Tom," he said, "have you read the morning paper? Now, turn to the obituary page,

look at the second column. What do you see? There was a long silence. "Harold, it's you. No question about it. It's you, all right. Wow, hey, Harold - where are you calling from?"

Punishment after death, fear of it? Not for us. Not for us. The God of love, for us. Perfect love casts out fear. Jesus descended into hell. We don't need to be afraid of it. But that doesn't mean we live our lives like it doesn't matter how we live because we're not afraid of it. Many of our young people, college students who went to San Francisco, got to meet Cecil Williams, pastor of the Glide Memorial Church, and visit with him. He was talking about when he grew up in Texas, he was poor. They had no running water, no electricity, and his job was to clean the globes over the oil lamps. He said, "You know, if you forget to do that, then the smoke builds up and it dims the light." So they could tell when he didn't do it. He discovered an important truth from this. He said, "Neither you nor I can ask anyone else to clean up our lives. My life belongs to me, your life belongs to you. We have to clean up our life daily, or our light won't shine."

It's about judgment, not punishment. It's about living well, not facing death. It's about doing right, here, because it's right, not hoping to avoid the hereafter, whatever it brings. Hell is the consequence of a dim light or a shallow thought. Hell is the fear of what will come, to the point where we miss what's already arrived. John Wooden will be remembered for the number of games the UCLA basketball team won, but he will be remembered more for the man he was, for the life he lived. His father told him when he was young, "Be true to yourself. Help others. Make each day a masterpiece. Make friendship with fine art, and drink deeply from good books, especially the Bible." And John Wooden told his players, "What you are as a person is more important than what you are as a basketball player. All life is peaks and valleys. Don't let the peaks get too high. Don't let the valleys get too low." And then he said, "When I die, I would like to hear God say to me, 'Well done.'" John Wooden, I'm sure, heard that Friday. 'Well done, you've done your best.' No fear of death, no worry of judgment. In the Apostles' Creed, I added the words last week, "and Jesus descended into hell," because I believe if there is hell after death, or if there is the thought that is might be, Jesus went to prepare a place for us so that we can live our lives knowing judgment comes in the way we live it, not in the punishment that might unfold after we're dead. No need to be afraid. Just be about what is happening and live for others and count our blessings, and ask for guidance, and be true to ourselves. That's all. We know there can be hell on earth, in places, and in people. And we are not living in fear of hell after death, because God is love. Christ is Lord. And wherever hell is, he is there. Wherever in hell we are, God sent him there, for God is love, and perfect love casts out fear. And that is the hard bottom of life, which we call reality.