

Sunday, April 2, 2017

Psalm 130 (853 VU Ref.1)

Luke 12:1-7 (8-12)

Luke 23: 39-43

Fear of Heaven and Hell

We continue our Lenten journey with our theme of “Freedom from Fear” and as stated a few weeks ago, in order to gain freedom from our fears, we need to name them. Today our focus is on the fear of heaven vs hell and what people of faith should believe regarding where they will be going once they die and leave our earthly home. While we speak of heaven and hell today, it is my hope that you think of those people whom you loved and have died will be where you will go when your life on earth ends! May God’s Spirit speak to you and calm any fear or uncertainties you might have.

A minister asked her congregation: “How many of you would like to go to heaven?” Everyone in the congregation raised their hand except one little boy. The minister asked this boy why he wouldn’t like to go to heaven. “I’m sorry, I can’t. We are having a birthday party for my grandma this afternoon and I have to go and eat cake!”

This may be a bit humorous but this question of heaven or its alternative hell is rarely asked in many Christian churches today. Erwin Lutzer in his book, One Minute After You Die, states that “hell disappeared and no one noticed.” Yes, hell is an unpleasant topic and seems to be out of step with our times, yet if we turn to the Basis of Union of the UCC we read. Article XIX (19) states: “We believe that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and of the unjust, through the power of the Son of God, who shall come to judge the living and the dead; that the finally impenitent shall go away into eternal punishment and the righteous into life eternal.” Hell is a part of the doctrine of the United Church, but it is often neglected because it is difficult to reconcile hell with the love of God. How could a God of love send anyone to a life of eternal torment? Yet there are many people who believe in both heaven and hell as a final home and are unsure of their destination. This causes fear within one who is drawing closer to death, or they are afraid for a loved one’s place for eternity. Just for a moment, reflect on this question: Do you believe in heaven and is this is where you want to go to eternally live? How many of you believe that there is another place where you/one might end up- hell?

In our reading from Luke 12 Jesus is speaking to his disciples while a huge crowd of thousands had gathered. The crowds were very large as people wanted to hear him and they were trampling on each other. He warns the disciples about being on guard against the Pharisees as they might want to shut down Jesus' time of teaching. But then Jesus tells them that everything will be revealed that needs to be known. All that has been said as he has taught it both in the evening and daytime will be openly shared. Jesus is warning the disciples of what is to come.

In this passage, it also seems that Jesus both frees them from a fear and tells them to have a fear. He states that they should not fear those who can kill the body, but to fear the One who has the authority to "throw you into hell". This does not sound like Jesus is freeing the people from anything! What is the fear that Jesus speaks about? Being thrown into hell for all of eternity. But also the fear that God wants to throw us there that is, God is just waiting for us to mess up and that all it takes is one mistake for God to be done with us. Is this your fear, too?

Jesus anticipates this fear and so he does not leave the disciples living in fear. He speaks to it immediately. Jesus then asks them, "Are not 5 sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God." So it is with you! God knows everything about you—including the number of hairs on your head. Don't be afraid because you are worth more than the sparrows! What this means for us that even though God has the power to throw us into hell he does not have the desire to do it. He loves us too much to send us to a place where there is a lake of fire and where desires are never satisfied. God loves us too much and would never abandon us to this place. Whether the other unbelievers there would be able to communicate is unknown but sometimes the thought of being in solitude forever is frightening for we are creatures needing and yearning community. Hell is also described as an easy place to enter but there is no exit. But there is an amazing alternative because of the Teacher who warned his followers and of God who truly loves us unconditionally.

The alternative place for eternity is heaven or as some describe it paradise as created by the hand of God. A paradise known as heaven the dwelling place of God! We are worth so much to God, that is, God loves us so much that he does not want to lose us to hell. We might be afraid that we are not doing enough to get into heaven, or that we will mess up and won't be forgiven but the story of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection leads us to renew our faith.

In Luke 23 Jesus is nailed to the cross and is between to other people who are being crucified at the same time. One of the criminals insults him. But the other criminal rebukes him and declares, "Don't you fear God since you are under the same sentence? We are being punished justly for what we did wrong, but this man has done nothing wrong!" This criminal then turns and speaks asking. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus answers this criminal and says, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." What does this mean for the criminal? For Jesus? For the other criminal? They were all going to die within the day. Jesus knew that he would return to paradise—heaven upon death, yet later be alive on earth again for this was God's plan being played out for Jesus' life. The criminal would be with Jesus in paradise and the other criminal—would he be condemned to hell? Jesus saved one of the criminals who believed that he was the Son of God but the other we do not know, was he bound for hell?

Jesus died on the cross and through this act, He made a sacrifice for all sinners and God accepted this. Jesus came to set us free from this fear. Though Christ was perfect, it was through God's grace and love, that Jesus made forgiveness and the promise of life eternal with God possible. God's Redemption at Christ's Expense enables us to receive the gift of grace and love of God.

What are we called to do? Many people have fears that they are not doing enough to get into heaven. But Jesus came and died to set us free from this fear. Jesus reminds us that God desires our good, desires us to profess our faith in him, share our love of Christ Jesus with others within a church family and to reach out to those in need. How do we know for sure that we will go to heaven?

We must believe in Jesus as the One who did all that we will ever need to stand in God's holy presence. To believe in Jesus, to trust Him for all that we need in this life and in the life to come. We will spend eternity with God because when we have trusted Christ in our life on earth, we know that we will be welcomed into God's presence after we die. To say, "I believe and profess your faith in God- Creator, Jesus saviour and Lord and in the Holy Spirit means living out your life as Christ's followers in faith and knowing that one day you will be in heaven and you have nothing to fear."

But when does our eternal life begin? After we die and are welcomed into paradise by Christ or while we live out our faith each day as the children of God on earth? This too is a question we must answer as we strive to live and love others in Jesus' name. We share in "A Song of Faith" (another statement of faith of the UCC) these words. "We place our hope in God. We sing of a life beyond life and a future good beyond imagining: a new heaven and a new earth, the end of sorrow, pain, and tears, Christ's return and life with God, the making new of all things. We yearn for the coming of that future, even while participating in eternal life now."

A JOKE FOR YOU! Saint Peter is watching the gates of Heaven, but he really has to go to the washroom. He asks Jesus to watch the gates for a few minutes, and Jesus says "Fine." St. Pete takes the book which lists everyone who's supposed to get into Heaven with him to the bathroom to have something to read.

As Jesus is standing there, he sees this old man leading a donkey up from Earth to Heaven. He notices the old man has carpenter's tools with him. When the old man gets to the gates, Jesus tells him he doesn't have the book, but asks the old man to explain his life and why he felt he should be admitted into heaven. Jesus would then make the decision whether or not to let him in based on the story.

The man explains "In English, my name would be Joseph, but I didn't live in America or England. I lived a modest life, making things out of wood. I'm not remembered very well by most people, but almost everyone has heard of my son. I call him my son, but I was more of a Dad to him, he didn't really come into this world in the usual way. I sent my son out to be among the people of the World. He was ridiculed by many, and was even known to associate himself with some pretty unsavory characters, although he himself tried to be honest and perfect. My single biggest reason for trying to get into Heaven is to be reunited with my son."

Jesus is awestruck by the man's story. He looks into the old man's eyes and asks, "Are you MY earthly father?" The old man's face brightens; he looks at Jesus, and asks, "Are you my Pinocchio?"

How many of you believe in heaven? Looking forward to seeing you there—one day!