

HELL
BLC – B. HULL SOMERS – 9.30.18

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29, James 5:13-20, Mark 9:38-50

This morning's Gospel should have a warning label on it that says caution: centuries of bad theology have sprung from these words, resist the temptation to apply these words into your current culture or context without study.

This Scripture is filled with land mines of possible shame-inducing and manipulative misinterpretations. So, before we get going on anything else, we are going to unpack a few things.

First, Jesus was not, in this passage, speaking about the hell that was originally conjured up by Dante's Inferno. Remember the poet Dante? From the 14th century? His tome Divine Comedy starts with a journey through his imagination of hell and this – not biblical evidence – is where most of the contemporary thought about hell being a place of eternal torment comes from.

Jews do not believe in hell. Jews do believe in natural consequences and in life after this one, but there is not the same mythology of suffering and punishment in their theology that has been adopted by many, many Christians and churches. Jesus used the word Gehenna, which does not mean a place in the magma of the earth's core where demons torment those who did not live an exemplary life. No, Gehenna is an actual place in Jerusalem – everyone who heard his words in his cultural and geographic context understood exactly what he was talking about when he started speaking of Gehenna.

Gehenna – what our Gospel text translates as “hell” this morning – was the garbage dump. It was a place where the refuse was taken and burned – fiery furnace language makes a

little more sense in this context. Gehenna also had a sordid history. The reason it was made into a garbage dump was because it had been the site of child sacrifice, so it was seen as a cursed and evil place and the only logical thing to use that kind of real estate for was burning garbage.

Jesus used super harsh language to get the disciples to listen up but he was not threatening them with an eternity of suffering in a place made up by a poet hundreds of years in the future. Instead, his harsh language was threatening that they would be garbage, worthless, refuse – something to be thrown out and trashed if they did not listen up and change their ways.

Not, by the way, by cutting off their body parts. In the first century hands and feet were symbolic of people's actions. So, to say if your hands and feet are causing you to sin, cut them off, really is better translated as, if you are engaging in sin – stop! Change your actions, not cut off your appendage – cut off the bad behavior. In the same way the eyes were considered windows to the soul and spirit. So, if folk were contemplating evil, Jesus was encouraging them to knock it off. Stop allowing evil into your heart and mind, stop giving it space to grow, not literally gouge out your own eye.

All these culturally specific metaphors which have, through the centuries, caused so much harm, so much bad theology, so much guilt and shame...were meant to defend the Spirit's work in the midst of the community.

Our Old Testament story speaks to the same conundrum. Moses gathered seventy of the most respected men in the community in response to the grumbling and complaining of the people of Israel. The people of Israel were sick of walking around the desert; they were sick of

the manna that came down like clockwork every morning – day in, day out the same thing. So the people of Israel did what all humans do when things start to get bad or boring, they began to dream about the “good old days.” They fantasized about the food they used to eat and the comfort of their former lives – albeit the comfort of the confines of slavery.

Instead of addressing these issues in the midst of the people, Moses and some the respected men gathered in private to ask for God’s gift of prophesy. They did prophesy but only in the context of their closed group. Meanwhile, in the camp, two elders, Eldad and Medad, prophesized in the middle of the community. Outside of the organized and controlled environment and within earshot of the entire community, speaking truth of hope and love straight to the hearts of the people without rules.

This made many of the leaders frustrated and they complained to Moses about those nobodies who shared the blessing that they had enjoyed alone with everyone, but Moses responded, “would that all of God’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put the Spirit upon them.”

In like manner, in our Gospel, the disciples were frustrated by the unnamed folk who had been casting out demons in the name of Jesus. The nobodies from nowhere who were slinging hope and healing in the community like it was free. The disciples were ego-bruised by the fact that the Spirit of God did not respect the confines of their own hierarchy.

This was the sentiment that Jesus spoke so harshly against. This was what got Jesus so fired up if you will – the squandering of the Good News and the control of the power of God.

Jesus said this control thwarts the Good News of freedom to the little ones. It stands in the way of people who are desperate to hear. Little ones were not just children in the first century – it was also those who had no voice because it had been taken from them.

In both the old and new testament we see examples of the people of God trying to control and set boundaries around who would get to move in the power of God and who would get to benefit from the power of God. And, when it did not seem to fit their fancy, they began to long for the “good old days” when things were more seemly, more successful and more, well, not now.

It is one of the favorite past times of humanity to remember the good old days. Especially when the present starts to seem frustrating and troublesome. And, believe me, there is lots of fun in recounting stories of life together – there is a real and good place for this. But if, in our longing for the good old days, we disallow the Spirit to move in new places and new people in a new way than we have ever known, we might as well go out with the trash. Our faith will be nothing but rear view mirrors and complaints and our hearts will not be in the future of the Kingdom of God.

I grew up in the church and I know very well the good old days. I know the good old days when the Sunday school classrooms were packed and everybody dressed real nice for church and the staff was five deep with full-time pastors – head pastor, music minister, missional pastor, youth pastor, and children’s pastor. I know the good old days when we had to move from the sanctuary to the gymnasium to fit us all together and still had to go to two services.

I also know those good old days as a time when one of the full-time pastors raped dozens of young women in the church and the rest of the staff covered it up for years. I know

the good old days where women weren't even considered for a head pastor position. I know the good old days when my gay dear friend felt he couldn't darken the door of the church where we learned about Jesus' love together. I know those good old days.

The good old days were just as broken as today, just in different ways and we cannot go back and for good reason.

We must not look back and idealize an imperfect past. We must not look so far into the future that we ignore the hurts and needs of the present. We must get out into the community and affirm those whose voices are being raised in hope and healing and add our voices and actions. There are still so many refugees from the good old days who need healing and restoration. There are so many who could use even a cup of cool water in the name of Jesus. Church, the world is waiting for us to get out in the streets and be empowered by the Spirit of God.

The world is waiting for us to have the courage to destroy and disassemble any institution that squanders the Holy Spirit – even if it goes by the name of the good old days; even if it means we have to take out of power those who have had it for far too long.

My siblings in Christ, we have been set free. The chains of the past do not have to hold us back. The Spirit is ready to use our voices to proclaim God's love and victory. The fear of disrupting institutions and family structures and reputations can be thrown in the fiery trash heap like so much garbage, and we can move forward in the strength and truth of Jesus.

We can leave the guilt and shame behind and watch as the Spirit of God transforms us to live in service to God and neighbor.

This is the Kingdom of God. Not the trash heap, not the good old days. Our bright future
in Christ. Amen.

This sermon is the intellectual property of Pastor Bethany Hull Somers. Please feel free to read and use for Christian education purposes but do not use or distribute without proper attribution. If you have any further questions about the use of this sermon, please email the church office: burlingtonlutheran@gmail.com