Sunday, October 19, 1975
HEAVEN, HELL AND JUDGMENT
John 3:16-21

Some time ago on one of those late-night television discussion programs, one of the participants strongly asserted that the main trouble with the cl1urch and the world today is that not enough preaching and emphasis is put on hell-fire and damnation. Or to state it in the positive sense, not enough emphasis is placed on the importance of working in this world in order to gain eternal life in heaven.

The person went on to say that the church has not been doing its job because it has not been teaching the young people in particular that the main purpose of life in this world is to prepare for and gain the life to come and thus the main job of religion is to help people in every way possible to escape hell and gain heaven after death. What he furthermore was implying and saying is that the church's primary emphasis needs to be on individual salvation and that salvation is defined or means being saved from hell-fire and eternal punishment in the life to come.

Well, that may be part of the meaning of salvation, but when the Bible says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved," it certainly means much more than just escaping hellfire or gaining heaven after death.

However, there was a time in Christian history when the main emphasis and the main question on people's minds was-- "Will I gain eternal life in heaven after death, or will I burn in hell?" And what must I do to earn heaven as a reward? Heaven and hell were thought to be distinct geographical places that existed totally apart from this earth and this life here and now. Those going to heaven after death would go somewhere "up there." And those going to hell would go somewhere "down there."

And when the word "judgment" was thought of or used, it usually implied final judgment at death or at the end of the world when all people would be gathered before the throne of God, and He would reward some with heaven and condemn others to hell for eternity. People believed that at death or at the day of judgment, one's eternal position was then fixed or static.

Though the concept of some kind of afterlife is almost universal among religions, the traditional views of heaven and hell are about 95% mythology. The Bible has relatively little to say about such things. The Old Testament contains no explicit description of heaven or hell. The closest that Old Testament writers got to the idea of hell was "sheol" --a vague kind of limbo after death. The emphasis in the Old Testament is on the present life in this world here and now.

In the New Testament, there is imagery about life after death, but that imagery and symbolism was never meant by the writer to describe what heaven and hell might be like. However, later Christians came to take some of the imagery literally and believed heaven to be a place where the trees, for example, were paved with pure gold.

And of course, in those times when life was often a cruel trial of disease and despair, there was deep comfort in the dream of heaven as God's good conduct reward. Furthermore, in the Middle Ages and even before that and after, when people thought of God in primarily an "up there" sense and that any famine or plague or flood was caused by the direct action of God because of his anger with the world, people then naturally worried about heaven and hell and

judgment in a final sense. The basic question was the one Martin Luther asked, “How can I find a gracious God?” How can I earn God’s forgiveness? How can I escape hell and get to heaven? And the church had some easy answers.

Today, however, we recognize our dependence on God, but we also are more deeply aware of our dependence on one another if we are to survive and live wholesome meaningful lives.

In our own country, for example, the fact that some people go hungry is not caused so much by what we might call a failure of God to provide rain or sunshine, but by a failure of people to provide jobs or by strikes or power failures or a faulty distribution system.

When we face flu epidemics, we do not usually think of them as being directly caused by God as punishment. Rather we face problems like disease, or air pollution and war and slums and crime and we have come to understand them as we human beings failing in our relationships with each other. Almost all of our problems are caused by our own greed and selfishness.

Some of our dependency has been transposed. We no longer feel ourselves so much threatened by God “up there,” or even by nature. Now, for example, in time of drouth, we irrigate. But if there’s a strike and we can’t get water pumps or the pipes or the energy to run the pumps, then we see ourselves as being threatened by other people.

On a large expressway in a big city, one flat tire during the rush hour can cause thousands of people to be late for work.

So maybe one of the reasons people in today’s world don’t worry so much about heaven or hell after death is that we have much to be concerned about as far as the heavens and hells we create right here and now in our own life and world.

People in Luther’s time asked, “How can I find a gracious God?” and this question drove people, affected their behavior in the world. unleashed crusades and started wars.

But another question often unsettles us, and that is — “How can I find a gracious neighbor?” Can we learn to live together, husband and wife, superiors and subordinates, blacks and whites. Communism and Capitalism, Arabs and Jews, east and west?

So, in today’s world, heaven, hell and judgment take on a new meaning. If we think of these in terms of an afterlife only, then we’re like a radio station that keeps on transmitting a wavelength for which there are no longer any receiving sets.

The Christian message is “this-worldly,” as well as “other-worldly.” We do not someday leave this world and then for the first time come to be with God. This world also is good because God created it and is still creating, and God is present in the world here and now as well as transcending all of creation.

This means there is much more to the meaning of salvation than just escaping hell and gaining heaven in some kind of life after death. The process of salvation and damnation, heaven and hell takes place on earth here and now and not just “out there” in the future after death.

To put it another way, heaven, hell, and judgment are states of existence and activities of God that begin here and now.

The world itself, life here and now is the beginning of our opportunity for fulfillment and salvation. Life after death is but a continuation of it in some way and in exactly what way we really do not know·.

For example, being in hell in this life can be expressed in a number of ways. It is alienation or being out of harmony with the creation. It is estrangement, isolation, despair. It is to feel cut off from one's fellow human beings and therefore cut off from God. It is to feel that life has no meaning or purpose. In this sense, many are in hell.

Hell can and does include a sense of the harm we have done or are doing to others. A father accidently backs his car over one of his children or someone else's child and hurts the child or kills the child — that father will be in a kind of hell for quite some time. Or we fail someone we love or someone or many who are depending on us. Not only does this sometimes cause us to experience a kind of hell, but we may cause others to do so also.

Studdert Kennedy tells the story of a drunken man who used to beat his little boy. One day the little boy was lying ill and delirious, and the father for once was sober and was leaning over the cot. In his delirium the little boy put his hands up in front of his face and screamed, "Don't let him hit me, Mommy," and his father realized what he had been doing when he was drunk.

Hell can also be the discovery that we were so intoxicated with ourselves that we struck out at the one who loves us. And as we strike out at people, we can also put them in a kind of hell. Destroy a relationship and a person can experience hell. Destroy a person's self-respect, do your best to reduce him or her to something less than a person and you are causing a hell for that person.

Sometimes institutions in society become demonic and cause a kind of hell for all sorts of people. War is always hell, no matter how else we might justify it, and it personally causes hell for all kinds of people on all sides.

Hell is the state of a person powerless to come out of himself or herself — absolute self-centeredness, dark and evil isolation, final inability to love. Hell is the experience of separation from God which we most often experience in our separation from other human beings.

Hell is an inability to forget oneself, a hatred and loathing of self and the world and a despair of impenetrable gloom.

Now to be saved; salvation as the Christian faith understands it, is being saved from all of these various kinds of hell here and now, in this world, as well as after death. And that's exactly the kind of salvation Jesus offered, and still offers.

We know from the gospel records in the New Testament that Jesus in his own ministry helped free people, helped people to have life and to have it more abundantly.

When people find what life is all about — then they begin to experience heaven here and now and it is not something we earn, but something which follows as a natural consequence of living in harmony with other human beings and all of creation.

Thus, heaven in this world of here and now is the opposite of what we have been describing as hell. It can be defined as the triumph of self-giving. It is to find deep and loving relationships

with all kinds of persons in this world here and now. So it is that when individuals are in love with another person, they often describe it as being heavenly.

What then does all of this have to do with “judgment?” It is not to dismiss the idea of judgment at all. It means that judgment too, rather than just taking place sometime in the future at the point of death or after death, takes place every day here and now in your life and mine.

Our scripture lesson for this morning from the Gospel of John said, “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” We are continually being judged by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

It’s a good symbol for when light comes anywhere, it shows up things for what they are. It is always a judge. What got by in the dark, now that the light has come, can get by no longer.

So, in Jesus Christ, we see God’s will in a person, a person who lives and says such. things a. “Love your enemies” -a person who actually loves his enemies. Does that judge us?

“How many times shall I forgive a person?” a disciple asked Jesus, “as many as seven times?” And Jesus replied, “Seventy times seven,” in other words, an endless number of times. Does that judge us? “He who would become great in God’s kingdom, must become the servant of all.” Does that judge us? As you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me, “said Jesus. Does that not judge us?

Judgment is not always so much being sentenced to punishment, although a kind of built-in punishment may be a natural consequence; but judgment is being shown up by the light, being found out, discovered in all of our failings and pretensions and greed.

Thus, any day, any time, that we see ourselves for what we are as shown up by the light of the world, then that day is a day of judgment. And the purpose of judgment is not that we be condemned to a hell of fire, but that we see our condition and then are saved. The purpose of judgment is to save!

Heaven, hell, and judgment — all are a part of our life in this world, here and now. They speak of our human condition. They are not just other-worldly concepts. And it is the message of Jesus Christ that our work, our mission is to be of help to persons here and now. Christianity is not just an otherworldly religion. There are plenty of people to need to be helped out of hell in the here and now.

But you ask, “What then about death and what happens after death?” We all know that none of us can escape death. But nowhere in the Bible does it teach that a person’s character is fixed and his or her destiny completely determined by the fact of death. It is our faith that the redeeming activity of God is not ended by death. Nothing can thwart God’s love, not even death. Amen.