Sunday, May 17, 1992
WHERE AND WHAT IS HELL?
Luke 16:19-31

Those of us who are in Christian ministry are frequently asked unusual questions. For example, three or four times a year, I am invited to be a guest lecturer in the Doane College, Lincoln class on “Religion in American Life.” In that kind of environment, especially, the questions are probing, sometimes personal, and others are more theoretical, but they are always interesting and even surprising. Personally, I enjoy people who are curious about life, religion, and how the world works.

One thing to remember about questions is that not all of them have answers that can be proven or answers that are completely satisfying. Some questions only lead to more questions. Then, too, there are questions that have been asked over and over again by people in every generation. “How can a good God allow evil?” Or to ask the question another way, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Conversely, “Why do good things happen to bad people?” There are no adequate answers to such questions. Furthermore, who are the good people, and how does one define “bad things” and “good things?” Is it possible that God judges and evaluates people differently from you and me?

And then there are questions about other religions, like, “Will people who are Buddhists and do not believe in Jesus go to hell?” That question was asked of me recently.

Sometimes, with questions like this last one about Buddhists, I want to ask, “Are you a Buddhist?” And if the answer is no, I could reply, “Then it doesn’t matter much, does it, at least to you unless you have a relative or a close friend who is a Buddhist?” But maybe there’s something else beneath that question. Perhaps I should instead answer the question with another question, “What do you think, and why?”

There are times when we need to be questioning ourselves as much or more than questioning the ideas or opinions of others. This is especially true in the area of religion. In studying religious faith, there are two approaches: one is to study about religion, a kind of information transferral process so that one knows a lot of facts or information about one or more religions. The second approach is to go deeper and try to discover what difference a religious faith will make in one’s life. In the first approach, you ask, “Where is hell, if there is one?” In the second approach, you ask the question more personally, “If I keep making bad choices, will I end up in utter, irreparable misery?” It’s this second approach that I’m using this morning in talking about “Where and What is Hell?”

The Bible, in the Old and New Testaments, is not much concerned about hell as punishment or heaven as a reward after we die.

However, there was a time in Christian history — the Middle Ages and up through the Reformation in the 16th century — when the main question on people’s minds in the church was, “Will I gain eternal life in heaven after death, or will I burn in hell? Therefore, 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 after death would go somewhere “down there.”

Although the concept of some kind of afterlife is almost universal among religions, the traditional pictures of heaven and hell in the Christian religion are about 95% mythology. As I said a few moments ago, the Bible has relatively little to say about such things. The Old Testament contains no explicit description of heaven or hell. The closest that the 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 our relationship to God and to our neighbor in this life, in the here and now. The law was given by God to the Hebrews so that they could live peaceably in a loving community and be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

In the New Testament, there is a lot of imagery and symbolism about life after death, but the writers never meant to give literal descriptions of heaven and hell. Following the accent in the Old Testament, Jesus emphasized the importance of our love of God and neighbor in the here and now. When someone asked him which commandment was the most important of all, he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Furthermore, according to Jesus, eternal life — life with God — begins here and now and then continues after death.

What happened to draw people away from what Jesus taught so that they concentrated almost completely on the afterlife? When life was especially tough and hard in the Middle and Dark Ages, and when people thought of God as primarily "up there," removed and distant, there was comfort in the dream of heaven as God's good conduct reward. And the church in that period was creative in figuring out all kinds of ways in which members could earn their reward. Furthermore, when people believed that any famine, plague, flood, or other calamity was caused directly by God because of God's anger with the world, their basic question was, "How can I find a gracious God? How can I avoid God's punishment?" And again, the church provided the answers.

However, theology has changed, and times have changed. Because of technology, communication, population growth, and other factors, we human beings have become increasingly interdependent, and we are more aware of our connectedness. Now we know that if we are to survive and live wholesome, meaningful lives, it means living in cooperation with each other. We are not only dependent on God's grace but dependent on one another. And theology again is emphasizing God's blessings.

In today's world, the fact that some people go hungry is not caused by a failure of God to provide sunshine and rain, but by a failure of economies to provide jobs, or by strikes, or power failures, or a faulty distribution system, or the breakdown of a workable social order. Now we realize that many of our problems are caused by our own greed and selfishness. Our question is not so much, "How can I find a gracious God?" but "How can I find a gracious neighbor?" Can we learn to live together as black and white, male and female, Arab and Jew, East and West, poor and rich?

What's all this got to do with the question "Where and what is hell?" Wherever and whatever hell might be after death, I don't know, but I do know where and what it is in the here and now. I've been there often — every time I choose misery over joy, every time I do something ugly in a relationship. Hell is being locked up in an unresolved conflict with your spouse for all eternity, consumed by a fight in a community where you've made a lifelong commitment, gnawed by the memory of past injustices, devoured by your own hostilities and unwillingness to forgive. That's hell.

Hell is a state of existence that begins in the here and now. Hell is one race declaring and living out its supposed superiority over another race. Hell is believing and acting as if the things that separate us are more important than those that unite us and make us one humanity.

Hell is a man who has nothing better to do than live for the weekend when he can drink beer while watching his favorite team get beat on television. Hell is a beautiful woman growing old and thinking it matters, so she gets facelift after facelift. For her, hell is growing older and older for all eternity and not being able to do a thing about it.

Hell, you see, can be custom-made for each one of us — frequently by our own hands. For some of us, it may be believing that we cannot have happiness until we get one more program for our computer, one more book, one more possession of some sort — which will always be just beyond our grasp.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God was coming, he told them, “The Kingdom of God is within you and among you.” The same is true of hell. As we have already seen, being in hell in this life can be expressed in a number of ways. It is alienation or being out of harmony with others and with creation. Hell is estrangement, isolation, despair. Being in hell is to feel that life has no meaning or purpose.

We can also be in hell because of the actions of others. That’s how interdependent the world is. Studdert Kennedy tells the story of a drunken man who used to beat his little boy. That boy lived in hell whenever his dad was drunk. One day the little boy was ill and delirious with fever. The father, for once, was sober and was leaning over the bed. 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 then the father was in hell when he realized what he had been doing in his drunken stupors.

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 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 creating hell for that person.

There are times when institutions in society become demonic and create hell for all sorts of people. Hell is the experience of separation from God, which we most often experience in our separation from other human beings.

If you want to avoid hell in the here and now, do not demean other people, and when others try to put you down, do not be devoured by your own hostilities and fear. Instead, forgive, and you will then be able to experience God’s forgiveness. Choose joy. Choose life. If you don’t, the time will come when you will so entangle yourself in hatred and self-justification and misery that you will have forgotten how to live. And at that moment, you will have already entered into a joyless eternity.

Jesus showed us again and again that a person can choose irrevocably the pathway to misery and death. Not that death was his main topic; mostly, he promised life.

That’s what the story in the Bible about the rich man and Lazarus, the poor beggar, is all about. In the parable, the rich man built a chasm between himself and this poor man. He didn’t do it on purpose but did it gradually by thinking only of himself and closing his eyes to the conditions he didn’t want to know about.

Both of them died. After death, the poor beggar was with God, and the rich man was in torment. His hell was made worse by the fact that now, for the first time, he sees beyond himself and sees Lazarus, who is no longer in misery and covered with sores, but is in paradise. The rich man now is aware of much that he was unaware of in this life. According to the parable, he yelled across the chasm and asked God if Lazarus could bring him a drink of water to cool his tongue. But God tells him that now a great chasm separates the rich man and Lazarus, and the rich man and God. And this chasm cannot be crossed. The rich man in this story made his own hell in his lifetime by creating this chasm, and now it can no longer be crossed. It's too wide and too deep.

The rich man then asks if someone can go back to his brothers, who are also rich and still living, and warn them because they are making the same mistake by creating chasms between themselves and others who are less fortunate. But he is told that his brothers have already been warned, just as he had been warned. He did not listen, and they will not listen. Like him, they had already made such an irrevocable choice that even someone returning from the dead would not cause them to repent.

What question does this raise, then, about you and me? Do I send myself to hell day by day? Do you send yourself to hell day by day? That's the hard question. Another hard question is not why does God allow evil somewhere, but why do I, or why do you, allow evil in your own life?

These questions are hard because they translate into: When will I stop building so many chasms between myself and others who are different from me? When will I, and when will you, stop giving your life to trivia? Amen.