



## What the Hell?

Text: Luke 16: 19 - 31

Sermon preached by Rev. Kenneth R. Gallinger  
Lent II, 2010

I've always both admired and been puzzled by people who keep the various parts of their life separated into nice neat little boxes – you know: home life over here, work life over there, church life in this corner, golf club in that one. I admire those people – it's just that I'm not one of them. The lines in my life are always kind of blurry; most of our friends are people we've met at church, where I get paid to go and Nancy has always been one of the most active volunteers. That makes things complicated. That's why, when I started writing for *The Toronto Star*, I determined that I would try to keep my column there, and my church life here, separate. Besides, it's an ethics column, which means it's sometimes about sex – and church people like to believe their ministers are sexual ascetics who perform only when absolutely necessary and then with their clothes on in the dark.

This separation of church and Star has mostly worked out, with a few glitches. I'm not identified in the paper as a minister, never mind the minister of this church – and the paper which we provide free every day to those who use the Heritage Room is the *Globe and Mail* – or, as I like to call it, the *Lawrence Park Journal*. I think we've lost one family because of something I wrote, but I think we've gained at least one, too, so, as the TD Bank tells me about my mutual fund, we haven't lost as much as some other people. But today, I'm afraid, the separation breaks down completely, because this sermon grows directly out of a lively little conversation that's been going on in and around my column these last few weeks.

Two weeks ago, I ran a question from a reader (and yes, all the questions are real – I don't make them up). The question, as it appeared in the paper, went like this:

*According to experts, people who have regular sexual relations live healthier, longer lives. I am a person of mature years with a normal sexual appetite who is physically attractive and intelligent, but for whatever reason has never been in a steady sexual relationship. Recently, I "visited" a sympathetic sex worker, after which I experienced a significant drop in blood pressure and heightened feeling of well-being. Do you think it better for me to continue such a practice and face the prospect of a fiery hell? Or should I suppress all sexual urges for the rest of my single life?*

I'm not going to tell you what I said about the question of hiring a prostitute; if you want that kind of titillation, you're going to have to spent \$2 on Saturdays and buy the darned paper – or at least go the Star website where my wisdom is priced at what it's worth. But before dealing with the "sex for hire" question, I did say this to the reader:

*Assuming it's more than a figure of speech, let's deal first with your "fiery hell" concern. There may be many good reasons for avoiding sex with a pro, but ancient myths and empty superstitions shouldn't be among them. So repeat after me: "I am not going to hell, because there is no hell to go to". Say it 100 times. If anyone tries to confuse or distract you, tell them to "Go to heck". There, now – doesn't that feel better?*

Well, as you might expect, and I believe my wife and copy-editor predicted, that unleashed a minor barrage of, well, angry letters from readers. Turns out there really are people out there who still truly believe in a literal hell, populated by nasty demons who, according to my correspondents, from time to time visit them in the night. Who'd have ever think it? And not only are there people – turns out there are lots of people who, it would seem, lie awake thinking about the sea of fire -- either worrying about their potential place in it, or more often, yearning for the day when someone they despise will end up there. Which, it turns out in one or two cases, would seem to include me.

So this week in the column, I dealt more seriously and substantively with the question of hell. Again, I won't read you the entire column – remember, two bucks at the newsstand gets you both the whole column and the Saturday comics. But here's the core of what I wrote this week:

*The problem with literally believing in hell is not just that, in a post-Galileo, post-Darwin world, the notion of an underworld sea of fire teeming with demons strains credulity past the breaking point.*

*The real problem is with the kind of God required to make hell work. Those who believe in hell are forced to choose between two equally unpalatable alternatives: either a God too weak to keep his creations out of the flames, or an all-powerful God who willingly consigns her creatures to eternal agony. After all, there's no point having a hell if nobody goes there – so you've got to have it one way or the other.*

*Hell-believers, curiously, tend to insist on calling their God "Father". What a terrifying understanding of fatherhood: a "perfect father" is thus one with no ability to protect his kids, or one who becomes so fed up with his children he consigns them to an eternity of suffering and pain. In either case, such a God, and such a father, would not be worthy of worship – only of pity or contempt.*

I rather doubt there's anything in that which is troubling for members of this congregation; I'm pretty sure that, theologically, most of us long ago moved past the point of worrying about demons and goblins and things that go bump in the night. I'll likely still gets lots of cards and letters this week on this subject, but I doubt many of them will come from you. Still, when you say out loud, in a community of Christian faith, that there is no hell to go to, it does leave you with some issues that must be dealt with ... issues that are different from those you would deal with in a secular newspaper. And chief amongst those issues is the question of how we deal with Biblical texts that talk about hell, and particularly how we deal with the teachings of Jesus about hell.

References to hell in the Bible are much fewer than you might believe if you listened to preachers on television, which I trust you don't. The word doesn't appear in the Old Testament at all, and while Jesus, in the four gospels refers to hell on 12 occasions, he refers to money at least three times that often ... and Jesus was a poor guy who was usually broke. The whole idea of hell is a very late development in Judaism; about 500 years before Jesus, the notion of *Sheol* begins to emerge, but *Sheol* is kind of a murky underworld through which bad actors usually pass, a place of transitional purification or purging, not a place of eternal damnation as classic Christianity has understood the sea of fire. It does seem, however, that by the time of Jesus, the notion of a three tiered universe had clearly emerged; earth was in the middle of this cosmic sandwich, with heaven above and hell beneath. What's more, it's pretty clear that the teachings of Jesus are rooted solidly in that understanding of the universe. He understands that the God he calls "Father" lives somewhere "above", and he counsels people that if their right hand does something offensive, it's better to cut it off than it is to

languish in hell below. We are, rightly, appalled by the practice in some Muslim countries today of cutting off the hand of someone who steals or otherwise offends with it; what we tend to forget is that the practice is grounded in the teachings of Jesus, who says, and I quote: “And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”

So what do we do with these texts and these teachings? Well, this week I’ve read through all the texts in which Jesus refers to hell, and what seems clear to me is that in every case, “hell” is part of the context of the teaching, rather than central to the teaching itself. When I was younger, I was kind of a *Star Trek* fan; I was never really a trekkie, because I couldn’t wear the ears, but I thought it was a great show and caught it whenever I could. *Star Trek*, of course, was set in outer space, but it wasn’t a show *about* outer space, and the space context wasn’t even, finally, what made it interesting or fun. The show was fun because of the characters, the interplay between them, and the themes that were developed and matured from episode to episode. Space was the eye candy, but what kept you coming back were the people and the themes. More recently, *Seinfeld* was set in New York City, and that city provided a very active backdrop for the show. But it wasn’t a show about New York, it was, famously, a show about nothing; what drew you in, again, were the characters, and often absurd dialogue and situations between them. Intuitively, we all understand the difference between the context in which a story is set, and the meaning, purpose, and thematic material that ultimately bring the story to life. When we read stories, therefore, that were told by and about a Jewish rabbi who lived 2000 years ago in the even-now foreign culture of Palestine, we need to allow those same intuitions to govern our reading. In the year 30 AD, Jesus occasionally sets his characters in hell, in the same way that in the year 1964 Gene Roddenberry set his characters in space, and in the year 1989 Jerry Seinfeld set his characters in the Big Apple. And here’s the thing: Roddenberry’s stories were no less real, no less entertaining than Seinfeld’s simply because New York exists and outer space as Roddenberry portrayed it does not. The reality lies in the characters, the drama, and ultimately the truth of the tale. The biggest genre of literature amongst teenagers today is the vampire novel; that doesn’t mean your kids believe in vampires, it just means that vampires as a literary device allow for the unfolding of the vivid passions and sometimes violent emotions that define the teenage years. Vampires are the context; the content is the even when life sucks, there is still a place for love and passion.

This morning’s scripture reading is one of my favourites amongst all the stories of Jesus. In case you were napping during the scripture reading, let me review it for you. Jesus said:

*Once upon a time, there was a rich guy, who had nothing but the very best, and a poor guy, who had nothing. The poor guy’s name was Lazarus, and the rich guy’s name doesn’t matter. Lazarus was so poor that all he ever ate were the scraps that fell on the floor from the rich guy’s table – and while he was eating, the rich guy’s dog was busy licking his wounds. Lazarus died, and went to heaven; the rich guy died and went to hell.*

*The rich guy was in agony, writhing in the flames, and he called out to heaven pleading for Lazarus to dip his finger in water, and bring him even that much of a drink. But a voice from heaven cried out “Hah! You had everything in life, now it’s Lazarus turn.” “Well then” said the rich man, “at least let me go back to earth and warn my friends at the club about what’s going to happen to them”. “Hah again”*

*said the heavenly voice. "Rich guys like you have had lots of warning, from the beginning of time. One more warning isn't going to make any difference to anyone".*

It's stories like this that make it so important for me to come right out and say "there is no real place like hell". Hell in this story is a literary device, just as the characters are fictionalized people – these two men never literally lived as such. And it's important to say that, because it takes away from us the easy, escapist response to this story. You see, the cheap and easy response is to get into some sort of theological debate – is hell real? Was this fair to the rich man? Why couldn't he go back and save his family and friends? Etc. Etc. But Jesus doesn't tell this story so we'll have a theological debate. He tells it *so that rich guys like you and me will understand that we have a responsibility for the poor*. It's too easy for us to focus on the context, and thus avoid dealing with the content – not just of this story, but of the entire teaching of Jesus. Jesus was a Palestinian man of the first century – of course his stories are set in the cosmology and world view of that place and time. But poor people still eat the scraps that fall off the tables of the rich. And that, my friends, is what hell is really all about.

Amen.