

So...did you do it?

We ended worship last week, “Marked with the cross of Christ, to go and serve the Lord.” We end each week with a similar command. You say thanks be to God! That means you are going to listen. Right?

So did you go and eat with sinners?

Did you share a story about being lost, and God finding you?

Did you party with others, celebrating God’s presence?

Did you shout for joy over God’s gifts?

The parables in Luke drive the message home, and last week was a feel good story. Last week we found a lost mooing cow during the children’s sermon for heaven’s sake. The lost are found. Last week was grace, love. Last week gave you some warm fuzzy feelings!

This week – it’s a challenge. It’s uncomfortable. It’s agony. It is hell.

Figuratively. The images of flames, chasms, separation from God, hunger, thirst. All it is missing is the weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I tried to get some volunteers to do a kids message this week – but nobody took me up on that offer.

So, I know this parable is on the other extreme, and if you want to leave – sorry, you can't. You're stuck in those pews for a few more minutes.

This C.S. Lewis quote holds some weight for us: *“I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity.”*

Yes, the image of eternity as hell and flames, this parable makes us uncomfortable.

But why...it's just an image. Are we fearful that we are the rich who have ignored the poor, and we will end up on the wrong side? If this parable were able salvation – all of us would be in trouble. Maybe that is why we needed to hear last week's Lost Parables, God's love and grace – in order to hear this parable without squirming too much.

Because this parable is not about eternity, it's about today.

It is an image of hell – on earth. The hell that the poor face every day. The hell of discrimination, and privilege. The hell of separation in our communities, instead of inclusion. The hell of ignoring the needs of our brothers and sisters. The hell of sin and evil.

Jesus' parable is preached, to point out our sin, our failure, our need for God. It is perfect for Lent. Jesus is preaching parable, after parable – 6 in a row.

Sometimes Jesus' words comfort. Sometimes they challenge. My friend Jeff reminds me that Jesus repelled as many as he drew in - as he preached the gospel.

Or as we learned in seminary – sermons will sometimes afflict the comfortable, and comfort the afflicted. Maybe not in the same sermon though.

So, what does it mean for us?

Sometimes we have to sit in places that are uncomfortable. With people that make us uncomfortable. Not fictional places like hell or purgatory. But in places we visit daily.

But maybe with fellow sinners at our tables. At Easter Brunch.  
Or a hard conversation at Sunshine Supper.  
Sitting with the uncertainty of a motorhome parked in our parking lot.  
Or the homeless child on the street.

Have you ever turned someone away who asked for help? I have. And when that door closes, or the phone hangs up, I regret it. For a moment. Because then I can forget it and go on with my day.

For the rich man...do you think it is more uncomfortable hearing this parable...or actually sitting with the poor man Lazarus on his doorstep?

We want to run the safe comfortable places, but sometimes we need to sit and be uncomfortable. Sit in agony. To watch and listen, and spend time with the suffering.

The Rich Man never helped Lazarus, but then wanted/expected Lazarus to aid him in the afterlife – not only that to aid his brothers at home. So often, we only recognize things, or ask for things, pray for things that benefit us. We judge others based on how they will affect us, the good or bad they can do for us.

But seeing hell in the world doesn't mean we can praise God that we aren't poor or suffering.

When we see hell in our world – injustice, sadness, racism, sexism – we show the compassion and understanding of what it must be like to face hell on earth of every day.

We foster relationships, nurture connections, risk, dare, to be uncomfortable.

After Jesus is finished telling us about God finding the lost, God now has given us a command to follow in the steps of Christ and sit with the lost and broken.

God is about love and bringing us back into relationship with creation, even when our pain/grief/selfishness, sin gets in the way of us seeing God and seeing others as God's children, fellow workers in the Kingdom of God.

We may not have the answers. We may not be able to fix the problems of the world. Jesus already did that.

The good news is the great chasm HAS BEEN fixed. Jesus uses past tense. The chasm is gone. God has redeemed the world, the poor and rich, the saints and sinners.

The separation of humanity is not between us and God...but us and each other. The hell we face is in this world, in relationship to others, the sin that lives in our minds and hearts and judgment of one another.

We don't have to be the Savior. But we are part the body of Christ. We are the hands and feet, and mouths.

We bring good news where we walk, or where we sit. Even if it is uncomfortable.

So, maybe you didn't go and eat with sinners last week. Or maybe you neglected someone in need. You have another chance.

God knows us – and despite that loves us anyway! God knows that we will say “Yes, we will serve God!” And then completely forget to do it.

But don't worry, you will be reminded again next week.