

February 5, 2017

Sermon: Love Without Limits

Pastor Clay Oglesbee

Texts: Matthew 25:31-40, Luke 16:19-31

“What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love.” — **Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov**. That’s a pretty good definition, and it is the consequence of a whole *array* of sins, which are nothing at all, if not our ways of showing that we don’t know how to love: Stealing, quarreling, coveting, adultery, greed, gluttony, harming and killing, and so on and on... Hell is the place where God can no longer be found or envisioned by the human soul. It is the outcome of our sin. Spiritually speaking, it counts as the great drama of our lives—whether sin and lovelessness, OR forgiveness and love, will win out.

For over 200 years, since roughly the founding of this country and Methodism in America, and until recent decades, Methodists and some other Protestants have not said or taught that Jesus “descended into hell” when they taught the Apostle’s Creed. Though both Scripture and the historic forms of the Creed since around 800 A.D. warranted it, no one really knew how Jesus spent the day and a half between Good Friday and Easter morning. John Wesley thought he was already in paradise, so he minimized use of the creedal statements about descending to the dead, or descending to hell. When I was a kid, I was fine with that because I just figured, as any good Methodist would, that Jesus was

too nice a guy to go to hell, and that we were all really nice people, too. But as an adult, I've come to appreciate the ancient inclusion of this descent into hell in the Creed. Jesus was too nice, but the same cannot be said about all of us, the human race.

Only hinted at in the Bible, the story of Christ's post-mortem journey among the dead and into hell became so prominent in the popular and theological imaginations that it was formally proclaimed as Catholic dogma in 1215 and 1274. The poet, Dante's version of hell, includes the concept of the "harrowing of hell" which proposes that **Christ raided hell after his death**, both to minister to the dead by offering the Gospel's hope and love to those who had none, and to rescue the Old Testament Patriarchs, who had no opportunity to believe in Christ. *Jesus could enter into and conquer even hell, death and the devil without fear!*

*Figuratively or spiritually speaking, this tells all of us that there are **no limits on God's love and grace!** As theologian Philip Clayton wrote, "When I recite this in church, I think that there is no place that the encompassing love of God cannot be present." **Love is without Limits**—except those we ourselves impose by our determined selfishness.*

One bitterly, bitterly cold winter night in south Minneapolis, many years ago, I hopped into my wonderful, *used* green Volvo station wagon and drove

off down the street on a milk and bread errand for my family.

About three blocks from home, as I rounded a long curve near Washburn High School, I realized that while the brakes were working okay in that cold weather, the gas pedal was not working okay; it was frozen in place. So, as I tried to slow or stop the car, with my brakes pressed flat to the floor, the gas pedal kept rushing fuel into the engine, and the engine was roaring and racing to go full-speed down snowy, icy Minneapolis streets. //

Then I saw the stoplight a block ahead. Rather than risk an accident there with another car, I swerved around a corner onto a residential street going 35 miles an hour, and *raced* up that block—cars parked on both sides--with almost no control of the car. I could not slow down.

I remember thinking how unreal it all was: “Is this going to be the Volvo’s last run? Am I going to *die* on a bread-and-1% milk run?” I was deciding between slamming into a parked car or into a parked tree to get the darned Volvo to stop, when suddenly, fortunately, in the midst of that crazy, rushing, dangerously uncontrolled situation, the gas pedal unfroze itself. The gas-feed fell off; the car slowed; and I stopped—grateful that of all the harmful and damaging things that that might have happened, nothing did actually happen—just because of a little thawing of frozen parts.

I think of that little incident as a metaphor of Jesus' harrowing of Hell and the thawing, not of frozen parts, but of frozen hearts.

The run-away Volvo represents *anyone* with no inclination or ability to change the events in their lives by the restraining brakes of love and forgiveness. The "car"—any life, community, faith or nation-- that has **hot**, burning fuels of resentment pouring into its engine, without any ability to control that flame, will certainly do create death, injustice, mercilessness, and hell on earth, because it has no ability to stop itself from doing harm.

The "car"—whether it's a life, a political party, a faith or a nation—that is stuck on making its own defense without slowing enough to regard and listen to others, will also rush into hellish falsehoods. Only the "car" that runs on love--the right mix of justice and truth restrained by the quality of mercy—will be inhibited from costly accidents and crashes.

Without mercy, without grace, without forgiveness—we cannot exist, and we cannot co-exist. As Shakespeare wrote in one of his plays, if we do not care for one another and for God: "Hell is empty, and all the devils are here." *Love Without Limits* is God's way in Jesus Christ to protect us from our frozen hearts hurtling at top speed into worlds of hellish and fiery harm.