

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Rooted and Grounded in Love: Hell No – Love Yes”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
July 5, 2015

Lamentations 3:22-33, Ephesians 3:14-21

He stopped me in the hallway after our second service at my former congregation. He stopped me because he had a concern that he wanted to share with me. His concern was that I wasn't preaching on hell enough. “John,” he said, “You really need to preach on hell more. In fact I have never heard you preach on the punishment of hell. If you want people to take faith seriously, you need to let them know about hell.” In some ways this piece of advice did not surprise me. After all we were in the Texas which is, as I have said before, the buckle on the Bible Belt and many of the people I knew there had cut their theological teeth at revivals where the perils of hell were front and center. It didn't surprise me either because hell has been a central part of Christianity since the early 300s. Roman Catholicism made it clearly a place that ought to be feared. Artists and authors wrote about and painted it. Our Puritan ancestors took up the cause and offered sermons where we are like spiders hanging by a slender thread over a roaring fire. Finally it was taken up by preachers of every sort as a means by which they could scare people into believing. In other words, hell has staying power.

What is interesting about this staying power is that in the end, hell doesn't work. Hell doesn't work to make believers or to change behavior. While the fear of hell might encourage folks to take out spiritual fire insurance by professing faith in Jesus, it doesn't produce long-term committed disciples. I say this because studies have shown that only a minute percentage of people who make a profession at revivals, in order to be saved from hell, are still actively living or pursuing their faith a year later. And this makes sense because people see no need to pursue faith because they are now insured. Secondly, hell doesn't work to change behavior. It doesn't for the simple fact that people seldom worry about consequences which might happen sometime in the far, distant future. This is why people continue smoking or fail to save for retirement. The consequences of those actions are “out there” somewhere, so I don't have to worry about them now. So even if hell exists, well, that is a worry for another day.

What is interesting as well about this staying power is that hell is a bit player in the grand scheme of scripture. It is not mentioned at all in the Old Testament. There we find Sheol, which is the place where all of the dead, both good and evil, go. There is no concept of hell as we know it. And then in the New Testament it is mentioned....actually why don't you all take a guess as to how many times it is mentioned in the New Testament. Anyone want to venture a number? Well you are close. It is mentioned 13 times. And if we deduct for repetitions between Gospels it is mentioned about 9 times. Yep, that's it, nine times. The Apostle Paul doesn't mention it at all. Jesus only mentions it about 7 times and some of those are rhetorical. Consider some other themes. Grace is mentioned 125 times. Forgive and forgiveness are mentioned almost 170 times. Compassion is mentioned 80 times. Faithfulness, which is usually God's faithfulness to us, is mentioned 79 times. And finally love is mentioned 730 times. I say all of this to remind us that Biblically speaking, hell just isn't all that important.

What is interesting as well about this staying power is that hell cannot compete with love. As I said a moment ago the love-hell score is 730-13. It is this lopsided because love is the underlying foundation for all of scripture. Love is the description of God...God is love. Love is the reason Jesus came...God so loved the world. Love is the heart of the community...if you love you know God. Love is the heart of Paul's message. In this short section from Ephesians we read what it is that Paul desires for us. Paul prays that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith, as we are being rooted and grounded in love...not fear. Paul prays that we might know the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge so that we may be filled with the knowledge of God. In other words what matters to Paul and to the scriptures themselves is that we know that we are loved by God. For if we come to realize the power of this love it will cause us to deepen our faith in and relationship with God. It will cause our behaviors to change. Love will make us new people.

You and I are loved by God. It is that simple, and it is that powerful. The creator of the universe made each of us to be loved and to love. The creator did not make us to live in fear. And there is no better place to see a visual demonstration of this than at this table. For here we see that height, depth and breadth of God's love for us. We see the love of God poured out. My challenge for you then this morning is this, to ask yourselves as you come to the table, how am I allowing God's love to drive out fear and to change me forever?