



TOUCH POINT

## Christians Shouldn't Be Scaredy Cats – Touchpoint for September 21, 2022

**Luke 16:19-31 (NRSVUE)** <sup>19</sup>“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. <sup>20</sup>And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, <sup>21</sup>who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

<sup>22</sup> The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup> In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup> He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ <sup>25</sup> But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. <sup>26</sup> Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’

<sup>27</sup> He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— <sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ <sup>29</sup> Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ <sup>30</sup> He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ <sup>31</sup> He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

### Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.” Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.”

I was taught in seminary that in presenting a good sermon, you tell the people what you are going to say. You say it. And then you tell them what you said.

So here goes:

I’m going to tell you that “You can’t use the fear of Hell to make people love God.”

Then what I am telling you is that “You can’t use the fear of Hell to make people love God.”

Then I will have told you that “You can’t use the fear of Hell to make people love God.”

Why do I think it’s important to mention it three times at the beginning? Oh, I don’t know, maybe because most of American Christianity sounds more like Jonathan Edwards’ sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” than anything Jesus talked about.

Maybe because Dante’s *Inferno* has had more influence on Western Christianity than the Beatitudes.

Maybe because we all know what the phrase “**Fire and Brimstone Preacher**” means, but we don’t have a phrase or word for a preacher who preaches grace and forgiveness.

Well, other than “**RARE and UNIQUE!**” or perhaps, “**A Heretic Who Needs to Go.**”

Anyway, let’s look at the rich man in today’s parable.

He spent all his life avoiding the negative, avoiding the unpleasantness of life. He wasn't looking at embracing them, but at distancing himself from them. That's what he thought was the purpose of life – to simply avoid the negative.

Why else have walls? Why else have gates? Why else stay in your room and simply sit with what you have? Did he have joy? Was he involved with anything? Did he relate to anyone?

When he goes to the next life, he hasn't changed. He still thinks the purpose of life is to ignore the negative rather than embrace the whole. *“Abraham, send Lazarus to warn my brothers. Send Lazarus to help them avoid the negative. Send Lazarus to show them an escape hatch.”*

But Abraham refuses. You cannot scare people into Heaven. You cannot threaten them into Heaven. God is not interested in being the lesser of two evils. God is not interested in being the lesser of two problems. God is not interested in being an escape hatch.

I repeat: You cannot scare people into Heaven.

And yet, when you think about it... What has most of Christianity done over the years?

Emphasize the peace that comes from embracing all that God has created, or try to literally scare the Hell out of you?

What's funny when I read a lot of commentaries on this, is that they focused on the fact that the rich man is in Hell. And then they said this parable is proof of the existence of Hell. Funny thing though, when they read the parable of the kingdom of God being like a woman looking for a lost coin, they don't claim that as proof that God is a woman? Oh well!

Anyway, they say this parable is proof of the existence of Hell... And then they go on to threaten people with Hell and tell them if they don't change their ways they'll end up just like the rich man.

Which I find curious. Because the point of the parable is that you can't use Hell to scare people into Heaven.

I'm sorry, but I'm confused. Though it's not the first time and I doubt it will be the last.

So, what is God if God is not an escape hatch? You tell me. Can you speak of the Mystery without invoking Hell? Can you speak of your salvation, your healing, your wholeness, as something more than an avoidance?

I remember a few years back, speaking with someone who had just come back from a missionary trip to Africa. When I asked him how it went, he replied, “Great, 70% of the people we talked to were saved.”

“Wow,” I replied, “How did you do that?”

He showed me a paper box, about 4 inches x 4 inches. It had a bunch of questions on it. The answering of one question led to another question. Eventually, all the questions led to the BIG QUESTION:

“Do you want to spend eternity burning in Hell, or in the gold-paved streets and pearly gates of Heaven?”

Seventy percent of the people chose Heaven. And so the man had the people recite a prayer, and he was done.

And there you have it. The whole point of the Mystery becoming flesh was to have you recite a prayer because you are afraid of spending eternity in Hell.

Seems like Jesus could have done that in less time than 33 years of walking on this earth.

We trivialize God when we make God an escape hatch.

Peter put it well when he said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

When Abraham, in the parable, talks about Moses and the commandments, and the resurrection of the dead, this is what he is talking about.

Eternal life. Life in its fullest.

Life in abundance. Not wealth abundance – Luke has hammered us over the last few weeks about the dangers of wealth – but abundance in our relationships. Peace in the struggle. Forgiveness in the sin. Grace in a world of reward and punishment.

This is the kingdom in our midst. This is Heaven on earth.

The kingdom is not a hiding place from the vagaries of life, its pain and suffering. It is an encounter with them and an embracing of them. It is finding the Divine Mystery in the midst of them. This is the message of the One who eats with the outcasts and hangs on a cross. This is the message of the One who is resurrected and breathes “PEACE” on those who denied and betrayed him, tortured and crucified him.

The point of Jesus is not, “Look to me as an escape hatch.” But, “*Look at what it is in your midst. Look at what has come near to you.*”

“*The kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*” At the end of your hands.

I just don’t get all the Hell enthusiasts that claim to be Christian. It’s almost as if you were to take Hell away from them, they wouldn’t have anything to be excited about in their Christian faith.

I mean, if you ask them if they want everyone to be saved, they will say, “Yes.” But then when you add, “Good, you got your wish, because Jesus is the Savior of the whole world,” they aren’t so quick to rejoice.

Go figure. Somehow it takes away their power and privilege.

And here’s another thing: If we believe that God is going to perpetuate eternal violence on people at some future point in time, it isn’t a very big leap for us to perpetuate temporal violence on those we see as different from us. After all, why wait for God to do it?

God’s work, our hands – right? We’re just ushering in the Kingdom of God!

You see, there is an impassable gulf between living a life of fear and avoidance, and living a life of grace.

Avoidance is based on fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of the other. But as 1 John reads, “*Perfect love casts out all fear,*” and “*God is love.*”

The only thing that can take us from fear to abundant living is a death and resurrection. A dying to the ways and wealth of this world, where we live under the illusion that we own things, we have possessions, and we can avoid the pain of life.

And a rising to the realization that all is a gift. Even our wealth and riches.

Last week, we heard about the dishonest steward who made friends with his dishonest wealth, so that when it failed him, he would be welcomed into an eternal home.

This week, we read of a rich man who did not make friends with his wealth, but used it to build gates, build walls, build an unbridgeable separation between him and others.

What happened in the afterlife to him was simply a continuation of the life he had lived. Or to flip it around, he was already living Hell on earth with his gates and walls.

As I said earlier, the kingdom is not a hiding place from the vagaries of life, its pain and suffering. It is an encounter with them and an embracing of them. It is finding the Divine Mystery in the midst of them. This is the message of the One who eats with the outcasts and hangs on a cross. This is the message of the One who is resurrected and breathes "PEACE" on those who denied and betrayed him, tortured and crucified him.

The point of Jesus is not, "Look to me as an escape hatch." But "Look at what it is in your midst. Look at what has come near to you."

*"The kingdom of Heaven is at hand."* At the end of your hands. Here and now...

... In the breaking of bread and the sharing of drink at this table. Whenever we break bread and share drink with others, we are re-membered to him and to one another.

All this first took place on the night in which he was betrayed and denied, and rather than **instilling fear** in his disciples...

**... HE INSTILLED HIMSELF.**

*"Take and eat. My body and blood, for you."*

And rather than **threatening them with punishment...**

**... HE PRONOUNCED FORGIVENESS.**

*"This cup is the New Covenant, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin."*

The Mystery isn't an escape hatch.

It's the grace in which we live and move and have our being.

**Amen.**

# *Spirit in the Desert*

## **Opening Song**

### **Be Still**

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

### **Calm Me Lord**

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.

Still me Lord, keep me from harm.

Let all the tumult within me cease.

Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

## **Bible Passage**

*(A passage takes us from one place to another)*

## **Touchpoint**

*(Where God's story touches our life story)*

### **Healer of Our Every Ill**

(Marty Haugen)

Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow.

Give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.

You who know our fears and sadness. Grace us with your peace and gladness.

Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts. *Refrain*

In the pain and joy beholding, how your grace is still unfolding

Give us all your vision God of love. *Refrain*

## **The Meal**

### **The Lord's Prayer**

(Monastery Choir of St. John of San Francisco)

## **Benediction**

### **Gaelic Blessing/Deep Peace**

(John Rutter, The Cambridge Singers)

Deep peace of the running wave to you. Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

Deep peace of the gentle night to you. Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.

Deep peace of Christ, of Christ the light of the world to you.

Deep peace of Christ to you.