

Homily for 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Baha'i religion defines it as "remoteness from God". Buddhism says it's a "temporary place of suffering". Hinduism says that there may or may not be such a place. Judaism calls it Ghenna, while Greek mythology calls it Tartarus. The Islamic religion even describes it as a place of fire. And in September 2014, according to a Gallup Poll, only 58% of Americans believed that it really existed.

According to our Catholic faith, both heaven and hell exist. And while we can hope and pray that hell is more empty than full, we are still called to believe in its very real existence. In fact, in today's Gospel, Jesus speaks very clearly as He provides that parable to the Pharisees. Even more, back on July 13, 1917, three children in rural Portugal were outside, when all of the sudden a lady clothed in white with a rosary in her hands appeared to them. Among the important things that Mary, the Mother of God, revealed to these young children was the following vision. They said, "she opened Her hands once more... and we saw... a sea of fire. Plunged in this fire were demons and souls in human form... all blackened or burnished bronze, floating about... with great clouds of smoke... amid shrieks and groans of pain and despair."

But, how does someone "wind up" in hell, as we say? Is it God's way of punishing those who refuse to love and follow Him? That's one way of looking at it. But, I think it's more helpful to look at it in the following way. As each of us goes throughout our lives we constantly have to make choices – choices that are fundamentally either for or against God. Should I love God, or do I turn my back on Him? Should I love my neighbor or do I do him or her harm?

Now those people who continually made the decision in life to love God and love neighbor, when they die, it just seems logical that they would eternally pick what they always chose in life: to love God and love neighbor. But, what about those people who go through life refusing to love God and neighbor? What about those who definitively cut themselves off from God and the Church through their serious sins? When it comes to the end of their lives, doesn't it also make sense that they would make the same choice they made all their lives? It's not so much that God sends a person to hell. Rather, it's that someone chooses it.

Again, enter the parable from today's Gospel. We hear this interesting story of a sort of reversal of fortunes: Lazarus lived in utter poverty in this life, but then was rewarded with eternal life, while the rich man had an extravagant time of it here, but then inherited eternal death.

Now, my point in bringing this up is not to say that all poor people who have a difficult life on this earth will go straight to heaven. Nor am I saying that rich people are all selfish, and therefore are on their way directly to perdition. I'm not even saying all of this as a threat. And Jesus is not trying to push these things either. Jesus doesn't teach by threats or by judgments. Rather, He teaches by His example of making the choice to love. And that's what He's trying to teach us today: the need to love others, especially the poor and needy in life – and we do this through the choices we make day in and day out.

Now, that rich man had over and above the normal comforts of everyday life. In a very real way, he was like one of the rich Israelites that Amos was condemning in the first reading – those who had so much wine they drank it out of bowls, and those who had so much wealth they slept on ivory beds.

Again, there's nothing wrong with having wealth – but remember, that's not Jesus' point. Rather, His point is what do we do with our wealth? Money is not exempt from Jesus' commandment to love God and love neighbor. And, we are called to make that decision for love of neighbor concrete even by how we spend our money.

That rich man continually made the decision to pass over Lazarus who was lying at his very doorstep. He apparently made the choice never to help him. If we're not careful it's easy to fall into the same trap. But at the same time, we could make the choice to love our poor neighbors too. As the bishops of the U.S. tell us, we can do this by learning about the reality of poverty, right here in the York-Adams area, and around the world. We can invest our time and money participating in mission trips, as 15 of us from IHM are doing next week in our service with the Missionaries of the Poor in Kingston, Jamaica. And we can also financially assist the poor by assisting such groups as Catholic Charities and Catholic Relief Services. In this, my friends, we heed Jesus' call to make the choice for our poor brothers and sisters, and use our wealth to show our love for them. After all, that's why we call it "charity". God bless you.