

Hell on Earth

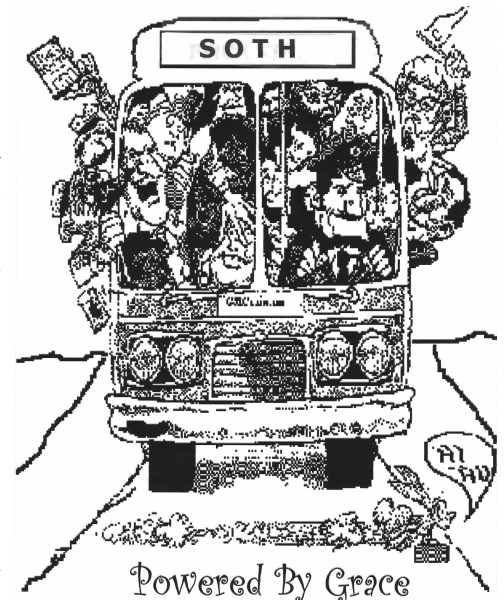
Members of Shepherd of the Hills are on their way to Pagossa Springs for their annual summer vacation. Presently, they are camping at the Great Sand Dunes National Park. As they gathered together for the evening around a campfire for food and fellowship, a discussion about hell developed after Lars singed his face while attempting to start the campfire. (See July Newsletter)

The Desire for Revenge

As John Riesenhauser stared into the fire, he said, "I am happy to hear that hell is not a physical place, but rather 'a state of being apart from God'. But, I must confess, sometimes I take delight in the thought of certain people physically suffering in hell. During my divorce six years ago, my anger toward my ex-wife was intense and I felt revenge and hatred consuming me. It didn't feel like hell at the time. I felt justified in my rage." "Now", Pastor said, "it's been six years since the divorce. Have you been able to understand the root of your hatred and desire for revenge?" "Yes, fear", John said. "I was afraid she would turn our two kids against me and they wouldn't want to spend time with me anymore. I also felt rejection even though I saw the divorce coming and we had been drifting apart for years. Part of the mix, too, were feelings of guilt for the failure of my marriage. I'm thankful people in this congregation stood by me during that painful time. I needed my church then, more than ever." "Jesus was abandoned at the cross", Pastor said. "I'm glad you weren't as members stood with you and your ex-wife during that painful time."

John's confession opened the door for another. Ole said, "What about #!%#\$@*&\$#X!\$% like Bin Laden and Hitler? We need hell to be a physical place just to burn those #@%&! *X% for all eternity! I take great delight in the thought of burning those &X*%\$#'s!" Thankfully, it was getting late and the children had all gone to bed and didn't hear Ole's language. You could see the blood vessels in his neck bulging and his face beet red in anger as he spoke.

"The eternal fate of Hitler and Bin Laden are in the hands of God." Pastor replied, "But, you have to ask yourself Ole, what good would their suffering in hell for all eternity do other than satisfy your desire for revenge? Yes, we all know the feeling of wanting revenge on people who have done evil acts. It brings out the animal instincts in us and the thought of their suffering fills us with pleasure. But, if you dwell there for long, you can begin to feel what hell is like, as hatred pushes God's love out of your heart. People who live in hate, live in hell. Look what your hatred has done to you, Ole, and what has it accomplished other than giving you high blood pressure and making life miserable for Lena?" Ole had begun to hyperventilate and was breathing in and out of a paper sack trying to settle down. "The potential to be filled with hate and hell is a possibility for all of us. Jesus refused this when he said from the cross, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do' and he asks us to do the same. It's central to the Lord's Prayer: 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us'."



Heaven and Hell as a Present Realities

Ole had finally settled down and was breathing normally, but his knuckles were white as he gripped a stick. With jaw clinched, he stared into the fire lost in his thoughts. He finally looked up and said, “I don’t feel so vell. Sorry about my language and losing my temper. It’s yust that when I think of people that do such evil acts, I get all vorked up and feel hatred in my heart. It doesn’t feel very good and I vant Yesus to help me get the hatred out of my heart.”

Hubert Lautenschlager put his arm around Ole and said, “We love you Ole. Change comes slowly. We all want Jesus to come more deeply into our hearts.” Then someone began singing “Just A Closer Walk With Thee” and soon everyone was singing reverently. When they began the verse, Ole joined in: *I am weak but thou art strong. Jesus keep me from all wrong ...* When they finished, Ole had tears in his eyes as did others. Hatred was being replaced with love.

After sitting in silence for awhile, Pastor said, “For Jesus, heaven and hell were present realities and ways of living that we can enter into here and now. Jesus’ concern was not so much, “How do I get to heaven?”, as it was, “How do I bring heaven to earth?” Jesus’ desire for his followers was and is that they live in such a way that they help to bring God’s Kingdom to earth. What’s disturbing is when people talk more about condemning others to hell after this life, rather than what we can do about hell here. Poverty, injustice, bigotry, racism, etc., these are all “hells on earth” and, as Christians, we must oppose them with all our might, because Jesus told us to.”

John Picard, a retired professor from Pueblo Community College said, “Pastor, you mention that Jesus’ main concern was to bring God’s Kingdom to earth and every Sunday we pray in the Lord’s prayer: ‘Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’. Just what is this Kingdom that Jesus wants us to bring on the earth and for which we pray?”

“‘Kingdom of God’ is a metaphor with several meanings.” Pastor said, “When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, the people of his day would have immediately contrasted it with the oppressive kingdoms of Herod and Caesar under which they lived. Jesus could have used other terms such as ‘Family of God’ or ‘Community of God’, but he chose ‘Kingdom of God’, a term that had political connotations. Because Herod felt Jesus was a threat to his kingdom, he had him mocked as a king during his trial and the inscription ‘King of the Jews’ placed above his head on the cross. When political kingdoms contribute to creating hell on earth, Christian citizens also have a responsibility to get involved. The ELCA encourages this involvement in its Social Statement, ‘The Church in Society’ when it states: *In faithfulness to its calling, this church is committed to defend human dignity, to stand with poor and powerless people, to advocate justice, to work for peace, and to care for the earth in the processes and structures of contemporary society.*

Being Released from Hell

“As you climb into your sleeping bags tonight, ask yourself how you can help to alleviate the hell people live in. Refusing to forgive someone can be a self-created hell. Realize people who have hurt you are like us—broken human beings in need of God’s love and mercy. God only knows the pain, suffering and hell they are carrying within that causes them to act out in ways that are hurtful. Pray that they can reach a point where they can expose it to the light of Christ and perhaps a trusted counselor or friend for healing. Release from hell often comes through forgiveness and the courage to open oneself up to another in trust. The love and healing of Jesus continues today through his church.”

~ PB