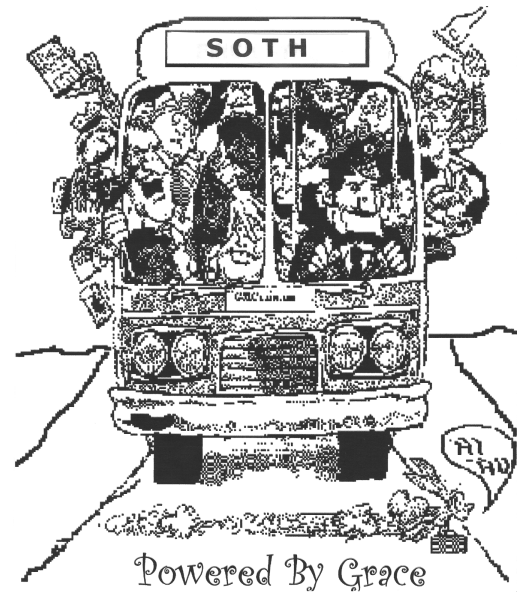


What About Hell?

At their Annual Meeting in January, members of Shepherd of the Hills decided to go to Pagosa Springs for their summer trip and on their way stop by the Great Sand Dunes National Park. Not everybody agreed on the destination. A few wanted to go to Rocky Mountain National Park, but after discussion the consensus was on Pagosa Springs. With 400 members, compromise is not always easy and requires discussion and mutual understanding. Mrs. Hinklemeier didn't like the compromise and threatened not to go.

The ability to compromise demands grace and is a trait she's learning. When Mrs. Hinklemeier was young, her mother avoided taking her shopping because she would throw a temper tantrum in the middle of the store if she didn't get what she wanted. On one occasion when she was at a store in the middle of one of her tantrums, her mother said, "OK, I will buy you the toy if you promise not to scream anymore." A family therapist was watching the episode and could no longer restrain herself. She went over to her and said, "On behalf of her future husband, please don't buy her that toy. She is going to be tough to live with." Yet, over the years many have seen Mrs. Hinklemeier soften. Remembering we all have wounds and weaknesses and are in need of loving kindness helps us to extend grace to one another, even if it is difficult. Healthy congregations are communities where one can give and receive grace and healing.



As Powered By Grace approached the Great Sand Dunes National Park, the beauty was incredible. The Park boasts of the highest sand dunes in North America. Members of the Fun Team had called ahead and reserved camping spots. It wasn't long and members had set up their camp sites and gathered together for the evening to share food and stories around the camp fire. Ole assumed responsibility for getting the fire started. While he was bent over a couple of sticks rubbing them vigorously together, he said, "Dis is how ve got da fire going in da old country." Sweat began running down the side of his face as he worked harder and harder but to no avail. Finally Lars came over with some gasoline and matches and said, "Ole, dos sticks are too vet. Get outa da vay and I vill do it." Lars tipped up the can and poured a bunch of gas on the wood. He sat the can down and began fumbling with some matches. Lena grabbed the gas can and ran away shouting, "You need to take da gas can away before ya start da fire!" Then Lars threw a lit match on the wood. As it burst into flames his whiskers and eye brows were singed. Ole looked at Lars and said, "Now let dat be a lesson for ya. Dats vhat hell vill be like if ya don't change your vays."

Hell and a God of Love

As they gathered around the fire and shared food with one another, Jill, a college student home for the summer, said as she stared into fire: "Does hell really exist? If so, what's its purpose? There's no chance for rehabilitation and I can't understand why a loving God would put people in such agony for the sake of agony. What does it accomplish?" Then looking at parents she asked, "Could any of you put your children in hell?" The parents were surprised at Jill's question and the passion behind it. In college she had taken a Comparative Religion class and this topic was discussed. She now wanted to know what we thought about it. She stared back into the fire and said, "I am not sure I can believe in that kind of God."

Jill's college friend DeeAnn was spending a couple of weeks with Jill and her family and was also on the trip. She too was in the Comparative Religion class. DeeAnn said, "I think its all about control. What greater way to control people than the threat of eternal damnation if you don't do what they say." Jill's parents were beginning to squirm in their lawn chairs. They didn't expect Jill and her friend to lead them into such a serious conversation.

“Thank you for your questions Jill”, Pastor said, “Your class has helped you and DeeAnn think seriously about an important topic. How about it parents, would any of you send your children to hell?” They shook their heads “no”. “So why do we think God, who loves infinitely more than we do, would?”

Hell and Jesus’ Passion for Compassion

“If you look closely at the final judgment scene in Matthew 25:34-46 and the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, you will find that Jesus’ criteria for judgment also reveals what he is most passionate about and what he expects of his followers; namely, that we show love and compassion especially to those suffering, i.e., ‘I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was naked and you clothed me, a stranger and you welcomed me. I was sick and in prison and you looked after me.’ THAT and not hell is the main point of the narrative, which Jesus spoke to the LIVING to motivate his follows to take his mission extremely seriously. Jesus’ same concern is seen in Matthew 7:21-23, ‘Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father.’ For Jesus in Matthew, ‘the will of my Father’ is his mission mentioned above. His primary moral imperative is for his followers to extend compassion to the poor and others who are suffering. Surprisingly absent in his criteria for judgment in these passages is any reference to correct faith or other moral issues.”

“The ELCA does not teach that hell is a physical place because God cannot create anything evil. Hell is ‘a state of being apart from God’ when we choose to shut God and love out of our lives. If ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8) how can God put anyone in hell? We put ourselves there because of our rebellion against God and that which is good and loving. If you look around the world, you can see the hell people put themselves into. Nations and individuals reap the results of their own bitterness, selfishness and hate-filled choices. God wants nothing but our happiness, spiritual growth and that we allow his love to flow through us to others in acts of compassion and service.”

Hans Engelbertson said, “What about in the Apostle’s Creed when we profess that Jesus “descended into hell”? That sounds like a physical place.” Pastor replied, “That phrase was added to the creed at the Synod of Sirium in 359 A.D. because Markus of Arethusa wanted to express the truth that in his death on the cross, Jesus experienced the abandonment of God, which is, in fact, hell. It is not in the earliest manuscripts.” From *The Lutheran Magazine*

Hell and War’s Symbiotic Relationship

“DeeAnn, you are correct in saying the threat of damnation has been used by people attempting to control others. The purpose of the Papal Bull, ‘Exsurge Domine’ issued by Pope Leo X on June 15, 1520 excommunicating Martin Luther, was to force him to recant his teachings. ‘Exsurge Domine’ means ‘Arise O Lord’ to condemn and banish Luther from the Roman church and ultimately from heaven, unless he renounces his teachings. Thankfully, Luther was able to see beyond this threat, to Christ to whom he sought to be faithful.”

“However, because he was damned by religious authorities, people would have felt more justified burning Luther at the stake. Once a person is considered damned to hell, they somehow appear less human and are more easily killed. It’s also a way for nations and individuals to proclaim God’s on their side as they engage in their malice and worse. The leaders of the crusades clearly knew this and referred to their enemy as “infidels”. More recently, the statement “Kill A Commie for Christ” made killing more palatable for some. Now, with the “War on Terror”, we hear similar talk from Muslims and Christians about one another. It seems war needs hell.”

“The ELCA Social Statement “Peace in God’s World”, which we have been studying in Adult Education, states: *We affirm that earthly peace is built on the oneness of humanity, and the dignity of every person.* Although we may not be able to stop war, we can contribute to peace by perceiving “the oneness of humanity and the dignity of every person”. I would also add, ‘and by refusing to view enemies as outside of God’s love’, which is what the Social Statement implies and what Jesus proclaimed from the cross.”

It will be wonderful when we no longer need the threat of hell for motivation to live a life of faith, or find it a credible weapon in waging war.