

## Like Hades!

September 29, 2019

When I was in second grade, so seven or eight years old, I attended Lincoln Elementary School in Appleton. We only had one car, and my dad had to be to work early, so I walked the ten blocks to and from school every day (uphill both ways, of course). Seriously, I remember those walks pleasantly. Usually I was by myself—my closest friends in the neighborhood went to St. Pius, which was in the other direction. So, I walked alone.

I liked that time. I could practice stepping over cracks so I didn't break my mother's back. I could kick a can from side to side on the sidewalk if somebody had littered. And I could pay attention to whatever came my way: birds, trees, neighborhood dogs, cars going by, and occasionally some other kids, depending on which route I took.

Sometimes I walked down Mason Street crossing Wisconsin Avenue – those were busy streets – with Quaker Bakery and its good smells, and Templin's bar with different kinds of smells. But usually I preferred the quieter, tree-lined back streets – Spring Street to Bennett to Grant – where we lived.

Now, I'm a trusting person by and large, and I was a very trusting child, having been raised in a loving if not overly-protective family. So, I was surprised one day when I showed up in school and the teacher called me to her desk and said to me: "Jon, I'm very disappointed in you. I heard what you did yesterday to Kay. And I want you to take this note of apology and have your parents sign it and bring it back to me."

Now, I was honestly befuddled by this accusation since I had no idea what I had done to Kay. But I had a hard time speaking up on my own behalf; I had no real need to do so in my family. So, I said, "OK," really chagrined at being in trouble – not at all my customary circumstance – and then spent the rest of the day wondering what I was going to do with this note that said as I recall it: "Jon was mean to Kay yesterday on the way home from school, and he is having you sign this note to say he's sorry."

So, that day on my way home, I took out the note and pondered what to do with it. I didn't want to disappoint my parents. And I really didn't know what I had done. I hardly knew Kay, and I couldn't recall doing anything mean to her, although because my teacher had said I had, I supposed I must have done something wrong, right? But it didn't feel right that I should have to confess to something that I didn't remember even doing. So, I took out the note, which was in my pocket, and took out a pencil from the other pocket. (This was way before backpacks weighed kids down with homework.) And I knelt down on the metal doors to the cellar at Templin's Bar, and I "signed" the note, "Mrs. and Mrs. Fred Pahl," in manuscript, not in cursive. I said nothing to my parents.

The next morning, I gave the note to my teacher, Mrs. May. And she looked at it, looked at me, and said in words I remember vividly: "Jon, do you think I'm stupid!? **You** signed this note. I'm sending you to the principal's office and we're going to call your parents."

And then I was sent to the Principal's Office – call it Hades. I was terrified, and I started crying. It was a place I had never been before, and it was a place where I knew only bad kids went. I sat there for about an hour, as I recall – crying, mostly – until my father and mother showed up. And then I showed them the note, crying even more, and confessed to having faked their “signatures.” And gradually it became clear to them that I had no idea what my original offense was supposed to have been. I remember my dad saying, “I wish you'd just been honest with us right from the start.” And that's the lesson that I took away from my first visit to Hades.

It was nearly 50 years later at my 45th high school reunion, when I learned what had happened. A 2nd grader named Greg had spit on a 2nd grader named Kay as they walked home in the other direction from my house, or so Kay – who is now a plastic surgeon in Neenah – told me. But for some reason – she really couldn't explain why when I asked her – Kay had accused me. She had just wanted to get me in trouble, she said. And at that reunion I was right back there in Hades again, as the feelings of befuddlement and dismay and sadness rushed over me. I was seven again, and I couldn't understand.

And, to be honest, the more I've lived with Scripture and grown in understanding of the merciful and compassionate God at the heart of Scripture, the less I understand the doctrine of Hell, and the more I'm convinced it doesn't exist in the way it's often been taught: as a place of eternal punishment for the wicked. I know it's been taught that way for millennia, in some circles, and yet the less it seems to fit with the loving God at the heart of Scripture including in our Gospel for today from Luke. I'll get to our Gospel text in a minute, but first let me just put it on the line. Here are my first of two main points for today: the only Hells that exist are the Hells we create for ourselves, or that we create for others. So, when somebody tries to scare you with that old bogey of an eternal Hell into which anyone goes who isn't in their version of the Jesus club, you can just say to that: “Like Hades!” Try it with me: “Like Hades!”

Because, you see, the Hades that we hear about in our Gospel isn't the “Hell” that we've come to conflate it with – that place of eternal punishment for sinners. That place literally does not exist – in Scripture, or in reality. Hades is the Greek word for the Hebrew term Sheol, which simply means “grave” or “pit.” Most Jews down to today, do not have any doctrine like Hell (or heaven, for that matter). Back then, however, Jewish theology was evolving, and some Jews were speculating about what happened after death and whether there might be some kind of conscious afterlife. To some, Hades was kind of a holding tank for all people – sinners and righteous alike – but in different compartments. The expectation was that at some point – on the last day, say – Hades would be emptied. Everybody would get out, although what happened afterward was similarly rich with speculation. In any event, the Hades in our story today wasn't really like what we've come to think of as Hell; it was more like what became Purgatory.

Anyway, Jesus appears here to play on this speculation in his story, imagining the rich man and Lazarus, after they have died, with roles reversed, in different compartments of Hades, you might say. One is a place of torment, the other a place of comfort in the company of Father Abraham and the angels.

Now, what is important about this story isn't what it says about life after death; it's important about what it suggests about life now. Whenever Jesus uses the term Hades in his teaching – and there are only six times – he uses it to describe the **liberating power** of God, as in when God will break down the gates of Hades.

The rich man is stuck, isn't he? As theologian and Biblical scholar Barbara Rossing puts it, he's like a child; which is what Abraham calls him. He can't see Lazarus (who stands for all the poor); he's blind to the suffering right outside of his door. Similarly, even in Hades, the flames haven't yet purified him. He still tries to boss Lazarus around – have him come here, or go there – like you'd boss around a servant or a slave. He still sees people as tools, as instruments, rather than as PEOPLE – flesh and blood who feel and who hurt and who are hungry.

So, on one level, what's important about this story is the **reversal** it points to: with God, the usual status hierarchies get turned upside down. The poor wear purple; the rich get the door. You can understand from that lesson how offensive Jesus was to the powers that be. Like William Barber and today's Poor People's Campaign, implicit in this parable of Jesus is a demand: don't ignore the poor, see the suffering around you, and **DO SOMETHING** to alleviate it.

And that's why for October and November, I will be taking an unpaid leave of absence from Union to seek justice for people who are poor, who are refugees, who are suffering. My biography of Fethullah Gülen, the Turkish Muslim preacher and scholar living in Pennsylvania, tells the life-story of a peacebuilder in the tradition of Gandhi, who has been called a "terrorist" by the Turkish government. Gülen's message of love for all people generated a remarkable global movement, but also upset the powers-that-be in Turkey. In recent years, the government has engaged in a ruthless crackdown on anyone even close to Mr. Gülen – closing of newspapers, television stations, and magazines; firing of thousands of public servants and academics; and imprisonment of journalists, businessmen and women, mothers and fathers. These people are hurting, and because of my research and writing, I am uniquely situated to bring them comfort and to help hold the authorities accountable for the human rights violations they have perpetrated.

I'll be on the road for speaking gigs almost every day for the next two months: in Washington, DC; Raleigh, NC; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Kampala, Uganda; Edmonton and Vancouver, Canada; Seattle, San Francisco, Denver, Phoenix, and on and on. It is gratifying that I have these audiences for my scholarly work, of course. But a lot of what I am doing at these events is listening to people's stories who are really hurting, and trying to bring words of encouragement: stay true to your faith; trust in God and in one another; don't mirror the evil you've experienced, but continue to practice the peacebuilding at the depth of your tradition.

So, I'll be leaving you for a while, returning December 1 when I'll preach from this pulpit again, God-willing.

And in the meantime, hear the wonderful words of comfort from I Timothy: “Of course,” he says, “there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment.” What a wonderful vision of a life that says, “enough!” “If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.” For, you see, the Hades that we build for ourselves, and for each other, often have more than a little to do with money. It’s OUR happiness that’s at stake in the mad rush for money: “Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped.” There’s that Hades, again. We get stuck; possessed by our possessions. You know how this works. You’ve experienced it; I’ve experienced it. Say it with me: **“Like Hades!”**

And yet, listen to a better way: “As for you, fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called!” Wow – now that’s a good fight – to take hold of eternal life (the Greek word there is *epilambano* which is an aorist imperative, like “Just Do It!”) Be so confident of God’s grace that you can take a risk without worrying about the reward because the reward is already assured: eternal life!

And that means that there’s a better way to live with our money, too, as we move toward our annual pledge campaign. “As for those who in the present age are rich,” I Timothy reminds us, “let them not to be haughty, but to set their hopes on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” This is not a kill-joy, don’t-do-this, don’t-do-that, woe-is-me theology. No, if you’re rich, be ready to “do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.” Because here’s the thing: (and you know this when you do it) when you share, you store up for yourself experiences and the “treasure of a good foundation for the future,” as Timothy puts it. That is, when we share, we discover what it really means to LIVE. And that’s the point: the rich man wasn’t really living, ever! He was dead while alive, stuck in the Hades of his isolating riches. And so Timothy uses the verb once again: “TAKE HOLD OF THE LIFE THAT REALLY IS LIFE.”

And that’s why we need to work together on getting clear about “The Green Gospel,” which is our theme in Adult Education for the year. I’ve been reading the book *The Uninhabitable Earth* by David Wells-Wallace, and it’s a vision of a world if climate change continues that could become like Hades (that is, if we continue to burn fossil fuels and pour carbon into the atmosphere): heat death; hunger; drowning; wildfires; disasters no longer natural; freshwater drain; dying oceans; unbreathable air; plagues of warming; economic collapse; climate conflict...say it with me: **Like Hades!**

And yet our tradition knows all about apocalypses – empires run amok and lying puppet politicians crucifying the peaceful. And, truth be told, they don’t scare us. Our God is a Creator, and we are created in God’s image. We are creators which means we can create ways to mitigate climate change. We already know what it takes; we have the technology. What is lacking is the cultural will to do it, to take hold of the life that is really life. And I believe that cultural will can emerge from our religious traditions. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists can lead the way to generate the will to end the climate crisis and mitigate the disaster. And it can start here at Union Congregational United Church of Christ in Green Bay. That’s the green Gospel; the

good news of Jesus Christ: WE CAN TAKE HOLD OF THE LIFE THAT REALLY IS LIFE.

And that means recognizing two things that have really been encouraging me lately. The first is the reality that ALL WILL BE SAVED. God desires no one to be lost, and God will hunt for us and seek us out until we're included. In this week's Christian Century there's an excerpt from another book I'm reading right now, David Bentley Hart's book – *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*. According to Hart, who has translated the entire New Testament from its original Greek into English, the New Testament affirms repeatedly that all shall be saved. All those references to judgment and Hell and Hades are WARNINGS of the Hells we might create here on Earth, the ways we get stuck in some crucifying pattern that harms us and the planet, and the ways we crucify the living God and each other through greed, anger, envy, pride, and so on. But the final vision of God, what's **going to happen** according to the New Testament, as Bentley Hart puts it, is the “universal restoration of all things [in] the Easter of creation.” Everything comes from God, everything returns to God – no exceptions. God is all compassion, all mercy, all goodness, all truth, all beauty. How can such a God leave anyone out?

So, we're Easter people. And that means, secondly, that I hope that over the next two months we'll develop a “green team” to really start putting flesh on what it means to live out “The Green Gospel” here at Union and in Green Bay. I've mentioned from this pulpit previously my appreciation for Richard Powers, the novelist who wrote “The Overstory” featuring trees as main characters. Powers helps us to get beyond “human exceptionalism”; that is, the tendency to see ourselves (and especially one's self as an individual) at the center of every story. Instead, when we see forest health as our health; tree health as our health. We can recognize just how wide God's mercy is and how extensive and amazing grace can be. All those trees, with their changing leaves and glorious fall splendor, speak to us of a loving God whose mercy is as ever-present as the air we breathe. We are part of the ecosystem. It's obvious, but necessary to say. And that recognition of being PART of God's creation is what can save us: reconnect us, motivate us in new ways, generate in us a commitment to let justice flow like streams of sparkling water, pure, enabling Growth, refreshing life, abundant, cleansing, sure.

And that's why we'll celebrate pets and animals this Friday at 7:00 p.m. with a beautiful jazz service to commemorate Saint Francis with a blessing of the animals. Because those pets are a grace to us, too, and their love for us and our love for them a reflection and fragment of God's love for us.

So, it's love all the way down – love wins – as Pastor Bridget so often puts it. I'm truly sorry that I won't be here to celebrate with you our 20th anniversary of being Open and Affirming: Love Over All!

October and November will go quickly, and I've done as much as I can to set things up to alleviate the additional burden that Pastor Bridget will have to carry in my absence.

Mark Smith and Dave Hassel have agreed to help out for those two months in picking up some of my tasks and I'm grateful to them.

And I hope I can learn, whether in Tanzania or Tacoma, that we've continued to grow in ways that TAKE HOLD OF THE LIFE THAT IS REALLY LIFE. That is what I pray for us; and it is what God opens up to us. I am so grateful for my ministry here at Union; I look forward eagerly to returning on December 1 and being with you through the holiday season.

And, we can pray, that means I will also be here with you for a Packers playoff run. I realize that's pandering, but it is my honest hope, too, and a joy that I know many of us share.

Thank you for all you do; for all you are: for the gardeners, and ministry team leaders, and musicians, and choir, and faith formation leaders, and smiling faces, and warm hands, and generous hearts of this wonderful congregation. Amen.

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**1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31**  
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