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Lent 4A – March 26, 2017

There's so much going on in today's Gospel, I didn't know where to begin. I wondered, should I focus on the healing of the blind man with all its symbolism and lessons about having one's eyes opened to God's love. Or, on his bold and feisty testimony before the Pharisees. The blind man clearly exemplifies how one realizes they are a child of God and then goes forth into the world living out that belovedness. But, the more I considered today's Gospel story, the more my thoughts went to the Pharisees. Because, their story can be our story, too. I wondered, about times when I'm blind to God's love (and think I'm not ) and my actions reflect my blindness. My thoughts also turned to what happens when we persistently refuse to acknowledge God's love, when we live unaware of who we are and whose we are. Or when we turn our back on God entirely, living for ourselves alone. I have no trouble believing that the free gift of God's redemptive love is for all his beloved children, offered through Jesus. But, in reality, that love is not always accepted. This lack of acceptance runs the spectrum from those of us who suffer temporary blindness to those who spend their whole lives crippled by hatred and fear. Certainly, a life unaware of who you are and whose you are is a life of despair and resentment, and often causes us to make our own lives a living hell. Feeling hopeless, isolated and abandoned by God, continually tormented and unsatisfied, these can be very real feelings when we live outside of God's grace. But, can this continue after death - what about eternal punishment, for the unrepentant?

So, today I want to talk about hell.

And, I'll tell you from the start, I have more questions than answers.

But, questions keep my faith alive, and so I wonder...

Over the centuries the belief that there is eternal damnation for those who do not believe has become a dominant view in Christianity. But, it's not the only view. The early church fathers, such as Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nyssa, all wondered whether salvation was for everyone, and that eventually God somehow redeemed every

soul. The idea of universal salvation, often referred to as universalism, has been a constant thread in Christian thought for two thousand years, with plenty of scriptural basis in Paul's letters, which speak of God reconciling all; and in the Gospel parables, which show an extravagantly loving Father. Of course there are also plenty of passages that support eternal damnation... where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth, as we hear in Matthew. Those seem to be opposing stances, and theologians have pondered these contradictions over and over through the centuries. A sort of middle way has been part of Eastern Orthodox theology almost from the beginning, and that is the belief that the whole of creation and all of humanity will ultimately be 'restored' to their original state of bliss (the term is *apokatastasis* in Greek) and that hell is a cleansing of those souls who do not yet believe. One strain of thought sees the fires of hell as divine light and are themselves redemptive. Some see the Orthodox concept of hell as closer to the Roman concept of purgatory. Fr. Andrew Greeley, Roman theologian and novelist (and also my college professor), imagined purgatory as a sort of wave of shame that goes through you when you die, cleansing you of lingering sin. He likened it to the feeling one gets when caught in a lie, but multiplied exponentially. But, Fr. Greeley had lots of wild ideas.

I'm not a theologian, so I can't really speak with much authority on this matter. But, as I've walked my own spiritual path, I've continued to wonder. I wonder if preoccupation with hell and eternal damnation may be less a concern for other's souls or what scripture teaches, than about our own hardended hearts. I wonder if when people insist on the existence of fire and brimstone for eternity, that perhaps they've already started lining up candidates in their own minds. I wonder also, if there might be some resentment that others might get to heaven who haven't worked as hard as we have. The parable of the vineyard workers, among others, addresses this stance. It begs the question, "why are you following Jesus anyway?" Teilhard de Chardin said, "You have told me, O God, to believe in hell. But you have forbidden me to think...of any man as damned." So, rather than being focused on why someone should be in hell, wouldn't it be more loving to hope for eternal life for all? The great 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestant theologian Karl Barth put it this way, "Complete salvation extended to every single member of mankind

should not be just a distinct possibility but something that should be hoped for by all Christians.”

And, I have to believe that if I am secure as a beloved child of God, then wouldn't any questions about hell be irrelevant? If I am truly “saved,” that is if I fully know who I am and whose I am, wouldn't a mark of that be that I see God's luminous presence in everyone and everything, the fruit of the light, as Paul puts it? And, if I'm not able to see Christ in someone, perhaps that's less about them than it is about me. The degree to which I can see the divine image where I'd rather not, really is a true test of how redeemed I really am.

In just two weeks we will begin Holy Week, when we will journey together with Jesus and his disciples on the horrible road to Calvary. What will we be thinking of? Will we wonder if we are like the blind man, coming to understand our belovedness by degrees, coming ever closer to the realization that Jesus is the Messiah? Will we be thinking about those who, for whatever reason, become more and more blinded to the transformative love of God? Will we wonder about those around us who seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, or perhaps if we're the ones lost? Will we consider the times when we have become blinded, refusing to believe what is before our eyes, because it doesn't fit our preconceived ideas of what should be? Will we wonder if we really know who we are and whose we are? That is the journey to Calvary, my friends. There are no answers without questions, that is the spiritual journey - uncertainty, doubt, questioning, confusion...it leads to the Cross... and eventually to Life Eternal. May we have the grace to walk it with Jesus at our side.