

November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023

### Matthew 13:44-53 “I Miss Hell”

Here’s a true story as told by John Pavlovitz in his book *If God is Love, Don’t Be a Jerk* which was on my Sabbatical reading list this past summer. I highly recommend it. According to Pavlovitz, two ministers met one day and were commiserating about the ups and downs of ministry as we preachers often do. Finally, one of them said, “I miss hell.” To which the other said, “Wait, what did you say?” “I ... miss ... hell.” This was a longtime pastor of a bustling 1,000 member church in West Philadelphia. His own confession made him laugh out loud because he realized how absurd it sounded. He said, “Hell was helpful. When I could leverage sin and hold eternal damnation over people’s heads, I could get them to do almost anything. I could get them to volunteer, I could get them to give more, evangelize more, vote for whoever I thought they should vote for – I could do whatever I wanted, get away with it, and justify it in the end.” For him, fear of hell was a type of currency. It was a sanctified, ordained, and acceptable tool of subtle and not-so-subtle spiritual extortion. Over the course of time, as his faith matured and he developed a more generous orthodoxy, it occurred to him that although the concept of “hell” is rarely brought up in the Bible, many preachers spend an inordinate amount of time preaching about the subject so they can gain or maintain control over their congregations. And the problem is it worked for this pastor! It was an effective tool! Now all of a sudden he was having a hard time motivating and energizing people without that existential threat to lean on! So yes, he missed hell. He no longer had a tool to effectively and collectively move his congregation to action. What’s worse is that his church was filled with engaged human beings who cared deeply about the world, but they were far more passive than they were before the preacher got out of the condemnation business. Which caused him to say, “I ... miss ... hell.”

I sure don’t. But then I’ve never really used it as a currency in my ministry. In fact if anything, I was usually on the receiving end of it in

the early days of my faith journey. I asked questions. I pointed out what I thought were inconsistencies between what the church taught and what I read in the Bible. In fact, that's one of the reasons I had such a problem with the church. Which is why I'm so thankful that my Campus Life youth leader helped me discover our church ... the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ.) That didn't stop the existential threats though. I had friends and church leaders who said they'd be praying for my salvation when they found out I chose to go to Northwest Christian College instead of the unaccredited Bible college on the south side of town where they taught hell-currency economics. Even now, I'm proud to say that every once in a blue moon I get a hell threat on social media, in person, or through letters in the mail. I used to have a file folder where I kept the best ones, but I realized how unhealthy and twisted that was! Anyway, I ended up making my home with the Disciples because we're all about studying the Bible. In seminary I had to take two years of Greek and a year of Hebrew before I could graduate. That's when I discovered that the concept of hell never really showed up in the Old Testament. Even in the New Testament the only two places mentioned by name are "Hades" and "Gehenna" and neither of those have much to do with what became the official "doctrine of hell" in the fifth century Catholic church.

Yeah, but what about the scripture that we just read from Matthew's gospel? Well, there you go and here we are, because this is one of the passages that advocates of hell-currency point to when it's time to turn up the heat and motivate church folks! What we have in front of us this morning are three illustrations of what the *kingdom of heaven* is like. The three examples are a treasure hidden in a field, a pearl of great value, and a net that was cast into the sea that yielded a big catch. Notice that these illustrations use the language of abundance. These examples follow two major parables – the parable of the sower and the parable of the seed which are both used to describe the *kingdom of heaven*. When most of us hear the words "Kingdom of Heaven" we usually get an image in our minds of how we've seen heaven portrayed in various mediums. For example, when I hear the word "heaven" I think, "Place in

the sky where angels with harps sit on puffy clouds.” You know, the place where all the good people go after they die. I’m pretty sure I got this image from a Woody Woodpecker cartoon when I was a kid. Or maybe it was from reading those comic strips in the Sunday paper where Saint Peter is standing at the pearly gates talking to someone who may or may not fit the criteria for heaven. Mike Caprealian used to give me those all the time. I imagine most of us have an image of heaven based on something we’ve seen or read somewhere along the way. I imagine we have similar preconceived notions when we hear the word “hell” too.

So here’s Jesus telling folks, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like ...” and even though he’s using all these metaphorical examples, we’re still thinking of white puffy clouds and angels with halos playing little harps. Then by the time we get down to verses 49 and 50 another image comes to mind when Jesus says, “So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Jesus was just talking about the Kingdom of Heaven, so this “furnace of fire where the evil people go to weep and gnash their teeth” must be hell. We’ve probably picked up some ideas about hell from Woody Woodpecker and Far Side comics too. Good people go to heaven, bad people go to hell. Whether we’ve been raised in the church or not, this is what we’ve learned, and this scripture doesn’t help much because it’s the closest thing Jesus said that conforms to our image and understanding of hell. Thank you, Gospel of Matthew. Of the four gospels you had to be “that guy” didn’t you? You had to be the only one of the four gospel writers who gave us this image of a furnace of fire where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Oh, and then there’s chapter 25 where Matthew makes a reference to what happens to those who ignore the poor, hungry and naked. God tells them, “Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” There we go! That’s the hell we understand! The one that gets used as currency in so many churches over the course of history. Although I do think it’s odd how a lot of preachers will tell you that you’re going to hell for reading Harry Potter books, but almost none of them say it will be for ignoring

the poor, hungry, and naked like Jesus says in Matthew's gospel. Hell-currency math can be a bit subjective.

So, what then does an opportunistic preacher who uses hell as currency do on a Sunday morning where one of the two kind-of-sort-of "hell references" in the New Testament is the gospel lesson? They say, "Welcome to our annual celebration of stewardship service! I've got a few things I want to say before your pledge cards are due at the end of the day!" But that's not the way I roll. It's not the way *we* roll as a church either. I do sympathize with this minister in Pavlovitz's book though. He's just trying to figure out what his *new* currency is. His old currency enabled him to use the fear of eternal torment to drive his flock. But that kind of currency does little to perpetuate anything truly loving because it values conversion over conversation which is one of the many things that is driving so many people away from the church. Having a solid moral compass and a good conscience is more than just punching a ticket to avoid hell. We need to provide an equally compelling alternative – something built around a different kind of currency. We need to create space where people can gather to demonstrate true community, deep spirituality, and a passion for justice as our denomination's vision statement asserts. Not because we're afraid of hell, but because we are moved and motivated by the needs of the people surrounding us and the Holy Spirit who equips us to meet those needs.

Part of the problem, I think, is that the church sometimes has a backward way of how we lead people to follow Jesus. I tend to look at the world through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. If you don't know what that is, psychologist Abraham Maslow once said that the needs of human beings can be mapped out like a pyramid. At the bottom of the pyramid are our most basic needs – food, shelter, clothing. Next level is safety needs like employment, resources, health, and property. The level after that is friendship, love and belonging. Second from the top are the needs related to esteem like recognition, freedom, and respect. At the top of the pyramid is self-actualization and the desire to become all that a

person can be. Quite often the church feels like it's only equipped to accept people somewhere in the middle of the pyramid or higher. Our view of Jesus and who can follow Jesus works only if that person has already achieved the bottom two. We're okay with Jesus the loving friend and we're fine with presenting that aspect of Jesus to people who are curious about following him, but we don't do so well with folks who are struggling to meet base-level needs. It's almost like we say, "We can't really help you with those bottom two levels, but we're ready to receive you by the time you reach level three." And we're fine with "Level Three and Above Jesus." We *especially* love Level Three Jesus. But we have a much more difficult time following Level One and Two Jesus even though he spent the majority of his ministry dealing with level one and two issues. "Oh come on, Jesse, we do all sorts of level one and two ministry here in the church." Yes, we do. We spend a lot of our time and resources engaged in ministry at that level. But I'm talking about receiving people into our fellowship and showing them the path to following Jesus.

Today is our annual business meeting. This is where we elect the people who will lead our church and help carry out its mission. We elect elders, board members and ministry coordinators. Several years ago, we discovered that our bylaws reflected a very old business model that required dozens of committees and committee chairs to get anything done. That model worked great from the early 1900s to about the mid-1990s because it was based on an American business model that emerged out of the industrial revolution. Recently, the business world determined that overhauling and streamlining this model was necessary in order to meet the challenges of a changing world. But the church didn't get that memo because once we get our minds set on something, it's hard to convince us that anything else could work. But we at FCC Chico took a leap of faith and discovered that there is really only three components to ministry. "In here, out there, and nuts 'n' bolts." To make it sound better in our bylaws we call those components, "congregational life ministry, outreach ministry, and administrative ministry." Instead of relying on dozens of committees to accomplish our ministry we have a

coordinator for each one of those components. There's the ministry we do here within the walls of our church, the ministry we do in the larger community outside our walls, and the ministry of making sure we're equipped to do it all. To make it work, we need you because as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we affirm the ministry of all believers. We are not in the business of providing religious goods and services so we can support an institution. We all lay claim to ministry through service, presence, prayer, study, and generosity. Yes, today is a day where we conduct the business of the church. This is when we receive and bless our estimate of giving cards which we used to call pledge cards, but that's so 1924. This is a day when we elect leaders, and we will bless and commission them after the first of the year when they officially start. Most importantly, today is a celebration of ministry which is why we have these tables set up. On each of these tables, we've got examples of programs and ministries that reflect what we do "in here, out there, and nuts 'n' bolts." After service we're going to break bread and invite you to go to these tables and take a look at what we do. Some of you might be surprised and say, "Wait, I didn't know we did this!" And that's the point. On the tables, there's a little blurb about what this ministry is all about along with a sheet where you can put your name and contact information. Putting your name on the list doesn't mean you're "signing up" for anything, it's just a way of saying, "Wow, this sounds great and I'd like to check it out."

See? That wasn't so bad. I didn't have to use any hell currency at all! As we enter into this new year on the church calendar in two weeks and as we approach the new calendar year in January, may we do so motivated by the currency of the Kingdom of Heaven – one that is dedicated to abundance rather than scarcity and hope rather than fear. May we create a safe space where can demonstrate true community, deep spirituality, and a passion for justice for all.