

## Trinity 1 2015 St Timothy

**The Collect** O GOD, the strength of all those who put their trust in thee; Mercifully accept our prayers; and because, through the weakness of our mortal nature, we can do no good thing without thee, grant us the help of thy grace, that in keeping thy commandments we may please thee, both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**The Epistle 1 John 4:7-21** BELOVED, let us love one another: for love is of God: and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love him, because he first loved us. If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.

### **The Gospel. St. Luke 16:19-31**

THERE was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: and there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes. being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented<sup>1</sup> in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime received thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil<sup>2</sup> things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence. Then he said, I pray thee there fore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.<sup>3</sup> Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

## *Tormented in This Flame*

Do you want to be healed? That's the question that Jesus asked the lame man at the pool of Bethesda. When you stop to think about it, common sense should be a little shocked at this question. If at any time the Lord God almighty appeared to me at the very nadir of the dark night of my soul, and he had asked: "Do you want me to make this all go away? Do you want me to deliver you from this desperately hellish depression? Do you want me to deliver you from being tormented from these flames of unfulfilled desire? What would I say? What could I say? I would *leap* at that chance of deliverance. Or would I?

This is the reason that Jesus asks the man that has had the infirmity for thirty eight years whether or not *he* wants to be healed. We don't know what the infirmity was. All we know is that when the waters were troubled by the angels of healing, which imparted some sort of temporary, sacramental grace to the water, because of his weakness, he was always the last to arrive. We don't know what the infirmity was - all we know is that Jesus made him immediately whole.

In most cases in which this expression of healing is used it refers to the healing of those who were paralyzed in some way. Yet there is one significant exception that proves that there is something much more subtly complex than merely making that which was crooked, straight; that which was weak, strong, that which was broken, mended.

Paul used it in giving advice to Titus in his ministry. He uses the word three times in one paragraph. The Authorized Version translates this word as "sound" *But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine: That the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience. ... In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, Sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you.*

So this is not exactly a medical word with a limited range. The word is "sound"  $\sigma\upsilon\eta\eta\varsigma$ . Now how can doctrine - how can speech - how can faith be cured of the kind of debilitating weakness that had practically played havoc with a man's health and happiness for almost his whole life? What does that word "sound" or "made whole" mean?

I think that to be made whole is to close an open wound from which one's life slowly bleeds, like the hemorrhaging woman. And anyone who has ever had an internal hemorrhage has had this feeling of going though life, struggling to stay awake, feeling half alive.

Being whole is to really to achieve health. And though many of us have never experienced what it means to be healthy and strong, most of us have had experiences and memories of being healthy and strong. And there is simply nothing like it. To be healthy and strong is such a wonderful feeling, and to be sick - really sick - either physically or mentally or spiritually - is horrible. Because the mind and the body are somehow woven together with the same fabric. And disease and suffering and pain are not figments of our imagination. They are real. Whether they be physical or spiritual - they are real.

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People say that they cannot imagine the flames of hell. I think that's because they are thinking in purely physical terms. The saints that were burned at the stake do not suffer like souls in hell, because their pain is only momentary. And God has set up the system of the human body to turn off the consciousness when the pain threshold rises too high.

Many have said that the pain of death last only for a second – and then it's over. Part of our message to the world is that the pain of eternal death lasts forever. If you want a gruesome picture of that horrible pain and suffering, read Dante's *Inferno* sometime. And you must also look at the amazing artwork that that poem has inspired, which graces our bulletin this morning. Dante constructs a multi-tiered Hell that gradually descends in severity – of crime and punishment to the bottom of the universe where Satan is trapped in ice. His freedom has been forever frozen. He was once at the moral crossroads. And he went his own way. Permanently.

And that's what the story of Lazarus is all about. In the healing of the man of Bethesda, he was at the cross-roads. Even though it was thirty eight years down the line with his ailment. There was certainly no gulf fixed between him and Christ. As I grew up as a Christian, people would ask me – do you believe in death-bed conversions? And for many years, I wasn't sure about this. Now I am. Because as long as we are drawing breath there is but one single step of faith that separates our souls from Hell on the one hand and from redemption in Christ on the other.

Though textual clues hint that this man of Bethesda had in some way, come to the place in his life where he was *co-dependent* with his condition – he was still at the cross roads of decision. He could still make the decision to choose victory and health and new life, instead of wallowing in his infirmity, feeling sorry for himself, hoping that others would feel sorry for him too. But self-pity and the sorrow and sympathy of the world will eventually drive some men to a place beyond the cross-roads – to a place at which they will permanently suffer – to a place in which there is no redemption.

This is the place to which the rich man in our parable had come. He doesn't ask God to be delivered from the torment of the flame. He asks that Lazarus be sent to cool his tongue. He was willing to humble himself before a former beggar that had been vindicated but he was *not* willing to humble himself before God and ask for deliverance. If he had asked for deliverance from hell and God had refused, I think that Christianity would completely collapse. I know my religion would. Hell is not a place where God arbitrarily decides to stop giving the soul second chances. Salvation is not about chance. It is about repentance and God's love for us. And redemption in his blood. Hell is a place where the unrepentant soul is allowed to live eternally in a place of its own creation – its will frozen in determined stubborn, hateful rebellion, forever apart from God. It is an answer to prayer, really. The unrepentant soul screams out to God – get out of my life forever! Hell is the answer to this prayer.

In the story of this rich man, there is absolutely no sign of repentance, even on the rack of hell. The great gulf between heaven and hell is partly by necessary design, and partly of a soul who refuses to bow before God and say: I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I have refused your salvation day after day. I'm

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sorry that I have ignored it, I have made light of it, I have ridiculed it and I have trampled under my own foot the very blood of the Son of God, by which I have been redeemed from sin.

By asking that Lazarus be sent to ameliorate his destructive, rebellious anguish, the rich man essentially implies that the judgment is too severe. From the perspective of the soul in Hell, the flames (and the ice) are the final example of God's unrighteousness. That's why the sinner can't repent. Because he will never give up the idea that he is righteous and that God is unrighteous. Thus there is no judgment more severe than the hell fires which we create for ourselves by turning the universe upside down to hide or to excuse our sin. For the unbelieving soul, there is no power in heaven or upon the earth that can break its covenant with death and self pity and self-righteousness - once the gates of hell have closed. During our time on earth, Christ will constantly ask us: do you want to be delivered from being tormented in this flame? Do you want to be made whole. What will our answer be?

I know what some will say. And we should weep when we hear them say it: 'No thank you Lord. It is through *your* neglect that I have come to this place of torment, not *my* rebellion. I understand the irony of having living sumptuously every day, while beggars lay at my door. But I mean really - what was I to do? Why do you give riches and then expect us to feel guilty about having them? And you said yourself that the poor would always be with us. Some people receive good things in life; some people receive bad things in life - but all things, both good and bad come from the hand of the Lord - isn't that right? Why blame me for your ill treatment of Lazarus?'

I hope that you can sense this hell-bent logic in this line of argumentation. Because it is coming from an unrepentant soul. It is coming from a soul that has abandoned its lust for life because it has made a covenant with death. It is a soul that would rather go through the eternal flames of Hades, then through the momentary flames of purgatorial baptism of the Holy Ghost. And it is an argument that will go on for all eternity - between unrepentant souls and an infinitely merciful God.

Let me offer a concluding picture. I was talking with someone this week about conversion. And I said that conversion was like the breaking of a horse. Until a horse is broken, it is wild and self-willed. It is beautiful but it is completely unproductive. But in the very act of allowing itself to be broken by a man, something very ennobling happens. The horse becomes much more than a horse. It is taken up into the manhood of man as God created him in all his glory. It is now the horse and his rider - the rider and his horse. The warrior and his war horse. There is nothing more noble than a horse that has surrendered to this domestication by man.

We have been saved from being tormented in the flames of hell because God in his everlasting love has sent his everlasting Son to be an everlasting propitiation for our sins. It is not because we are better that we are saved. It is not because we are mechanistically predestined that we are saved. It is because we have stopped arguing with God. We have admitted that he is right and that we are wrong. Our wills have become broken. And God has ennobled us through that humility and through a complete change of mind that we are taken up into the divine nature itself. That's called conversion. And it is this conversion that is the one thing that will separate or reconcile forever the soul of man and God. - Amen

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<sup>1</sup> This verb οδυναω is only used by Luke. A representative use: “And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing

<sup>2</sup> Kakos. Often contrasted with αγαθον as its opposite.” (Lu 2:48)

<sup>3</sup> Βασανος: “a touchstone, which is a black siliceous stone used to test the purity of gold or silver by the colour of the streak produced on it by rubbing it with either metal.” Mt 4:24 And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments