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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Matthew 25: 31-46; Romans 12: 3-7
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The Sheep and the Goats: Considering a Strange Christian Idea

This isn't the first time I've chosen Matthew 25 as our morning Scripture reading. It's one of the passages we most prize at this church - in our theology and our shared ministry. "As you have done it unto the least of these," Jesus says, "you have done it unto me." It's a beautiful idea, one that has fueled understandings of an ongoing incarnation ever since - the idea that God is somehow uniquely identified with the poor, the imprisoned, the detained, and all the rest. A good many respectable theologies, including that of this church, has been built on Matthew 25.

This is, however, the first time that I've had us read the passage to its conclusion. I'm always a little chagrined to admit how it ends. After this beautiful discourse about God's identification with those brought low by life, Jesus just keeps on going. He's like the guy in the job interview who gives a great answer to a question, but then starts saying things that make everyone in the room start to squirm. Those who fail to find God among the prisoners and the poor, he says, are not only missing something important, which is what he might have said. Rather, such people will be cut off from God forever. They will be utterly rejected by Jesus. What's more, he says, they'll be cast into an eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. "These will go off into eternal punishment," he concludes, "and the righteous to eternal life." If he were a job candidate, it's safe to say there would be polite smiles all around, and a noncommittal assurance that, "we'll be in touch."

Congregationalists of an earlier era may have enjoyed such passages, but not these days. When it comes time to read Matthew 25 to the end, I, for one, simply tend to quit reading. That's because more than a few of the sermons I heard in my childhood and adolescence fixated upon passages such as that. As a child, I can recall campfire talks at summer camp that spun fantasies out of that imagery, making me feel both anxious and confused as a ten year old. Anxious because I didn't wish to be sent to that eternal fire, and so I offered prayers to Jesus, to ensure that he would, in fact, recognize me at the hour of judgment. But confused because I couldn't understand what I or anyone I knew had done that would deserve a fate of eternal fire. I mean, really? As childhood and adolescence shifted to adulthood, I grew skeptical that hell was anything other than a vast and overcooked metaphor, and I became wary of those who seemed to relish that piece of the Christian tradition. Too often it functioned as a threat, and as a rhetorical weapon. So too, I began to distrust a God that would burn those he once claimed to love. For me, such a god began to seem more like a moral monster than a benevolent deity. And so as a minister, I have reasoned, the last thing the world needs is more hell talk. Peter Hawkins put it well last week when we were speaking. Hell is an idea unworthy of the Christian tradition, he said, and it's an idea unworthy of God. I couldn't agree more.

And yet, this Lenten season, we're preparing to go to hell, with Dante himself. On the evening of Maundy Thursday, I've invited all of you to turn out for a reading of Dante's *Inferno*, an exquisite imagining of the torments of hell. And not only that, some thirty four of you - none of whom, so far as I know, would hold to a literal understanding of hell - some thirty four of you have volunteered to read those poetic descriptions of torment, out loud, to one another! I will admit that I'm both surprised, and gratified, that there are as many of you as there are who are

interested in our Maundy Thursday descent into the flames. But I also must confess that I'm a little surprised at myself. You see, I had sworn off hell, including poetic representations of it. And yet when I heard about another church community that reads the *Inferno* every year, I knew immediately that I wanted us to do it as well. This sermon is an attempt to explain, both to you but also to myself, why this idea felt so compelling, despite all my reservations about hell. It's an attempt to take seriously, if not literally, a controversial piece of the Christian tradition.

Before I go any further, it's worth noting that, for all the ways hell has functioned in the popular imagination of Christianity and the afterlife, there's precious little of it in the Bible. About 80% of the Bible is composed of the Hebrew Scriptures, what is often called the Old Testament. And there is no concept of hell in the Old Testament. In fact, there's really no concept of an afterlife at all in the Hebrew Bible, just a vague, shadowy place where the good and bad alike go after they die. But even that is barely mentioned. Those who are most fervently drawn to the idea of hell are often those who claim a fierce allegiance to the Bible, and yet 80% of the Bible is simply silent on the matter.

It's only between the two Testaments, about 150 or 200 years before the birth of Christ, that a robust concept of an afterlife begins to be developed. Those are the years in which the Mediterranean world was Hellenized, exposed to Greek culture, which did imagine an afterlife. But even in the New Testament, which, if we're honest, comprises a pretty thin sliver of the Bible, there's not much to go on. The earliest writing in the New Testament is thought to be the letters of Paul, but he doesn't say anything about hell. The earliest of the Gospels is Mark, and there too, there isn't much to go on. There are some things that Jesus says by way of parables, but it's an open question of interpretation about whether he's referring to an afterlife. Careful readings suggest otherwise. By the time you get to Matthew, written some 60 or 80 years after the death of Christ, however, you start to find a few more references to something like hell, such as the one we encountered in Matthew 25 - though again, it is in the context of parables that we find the imagination of eternal punishment. And then the Book of Revelation, of course, delivers a highly stylized set of images that have fueled the overcooked imaginations of preachers and novelists and fundamentalist camp counselors ever since. But even that is anything but straightforward, despite what some might say.

What I'm saying is that if you're not inclined to think about hell at all, you're in good company. For the most part, the biblical writers weren't inclined toward it either. In fact, if you find yourself a little skeptical about an afterlife at all, you're also keeping good company with the Bible. Except for a thin sliver of texts at the end of the Bible, most of the characters we read about in the Bible were quite content to exist, and to be faithful, without such assurances. It's not to say you need to give up whatever you believe about the end - it's simply to say that faith allows for more possibilities than are usually admitted.

Even so, a robust conception of hell was developed over the centuries, and it has become a part of the Christian tradition, for better or worse. What are we to do with it? Short of dismissing it altogether, as I've been inclined to do, what might we say about hell? And what help might Dante's *Inferno* be to us?

I'm on my third reading of the *Inferno* in the last few months, and it's come to feel like a stunningly contemporary poem to me. I've been struck that for all the classical references that Dante makes throughout the poem, as often as not, he's encountering his contemporaries, or those of the previous generation, in the circles of hell. In essence, then, Dante is actually writing a kind of theology of his own present. He's diagnosing the traumas, the heartbreaks, and the catastrophic moral failures of the culture around him. What he's not doing then, is arbitrarily

describing the eternal agonies of those condemned for this or that moral failure during their lives. He's describing a civilization torn asunder by a civil war. Dante himself fought in that war, and so he saw its devastation firsthand. He witnessed not only the violence that it unleashed upon individual bodies, but the ways that conflict shredded an entire social body. He witnessed craven and base political leaders, more concerned with their own survival than with the wider social good. He witnessed debased church leaders, who traded their spiritual authority for a mess of pottage, which is to say, for a narrow vision of temporal power. He saw individuals who somehow lost their integrity, their humanity, as a result of the tiny deceptions and rationalizations they made to themselves. Dante himself was exiled as a result of the war. The entire *Divine Comedy* was written from exile. It is a refugee's reflection on the human condition, and the human propensity toward destruction, on one hand, and toward healing and flourishing, on the other. If, as you were reading the *Inferno*, you were to substitute Syria, or Bosnia, or even the United States in the 19th century for Dante's Italy, you would be on the right track. Those are the kinds of moral realities that Dante was grappling with.

One of the best places to sense these high moral stakes is in Canto 6 of the *Inferno*. Dante and Virgil have just confronted two individuals that yielded to their erotic desire - they're tossed about in a tempestuous wind, which represents their inability to govern the feelings inside of them. And so they're blown here and there by whatever strong emotions move them. It seems to be a private affair. But in Canto 6, the two poets enter a very public landscape, in which freezing rain and hail fall from the sky. And lying in the muck at their feet are thousands of dead souls. They are gluttonous, those who were immoderate in their consumption of food and other goods. It seems to be an individual fault, but as Dante converses with one of the souls, the image of the city, and specifically, of a divided Florence, is emphasized. And what we come to understand is that the problem with the gluttonous souls is not that they enjoyed food too much, but that they could not conceive of themselves as attached to a wider civic infrastructure. They had only their own good, their own pleasure, their own "taste," if you will, in mind. They failed to perceive that their individual desires, their loves, had any wider good other than their own gratification.

Dante is drawing upon an old analogy between the city and the body, one that should be familiar to all of us who know the writings of the Apostle Paul in both *Romans* and *Corinthians*. You are all members of one body, Paul writes to the churches in Rome and Corinth. Each part of the body plays a necessary role. The hand cannot cease being a part of the body because it no longer wishes to serve its function, and so too the ear cannot cease being an ear because it wishes to be an eye. All the parts are connected. All have a necessary function in the whole.

Both Dante and Paul are drawing upon an older Roman tradition, one found in the writer Livy. He tells the story of a famous conflict in the 5th century BC between patricians and plebians in Rome, during which all the plebians, the workers, refused to labor any longer. They understood that while they were producing the goods of the city, those goods were not being distributed to them - in other words, the workers were not able to enjoy those goods that they themselves produced, and that the patricians enjoyed. So the plebians seceded, and they all went to live in one of Rome's seven hills. The city came to a halt. The patricians then sent a person named Menenius to negotiate with the workers, and as a part of the negotiation Menenius tells them a fable, which to this day is referred to as the Menenius principle. It's about the parts of the body, and how each body part has a function in the greater whole. Eventually, the conflict was resolved by an understanding that the stomach - the patricians in this case - needed to ensure that

goods were distributed to the rest of the body politic more equitably. Menenius was persuasive, and soon the secession, the strike, ended.

Whether from Livy or not, Paul certainly knew this metaphor when he penned his letters to Rome and Corinth. But Dante did as well. And in this early canto, we begin to see Dante's entire project come into view. The misdeeds that Dante chronicles all have a personal dimension, but what lands these figures in hell is their inability to imagine themselves as parts of a greater whole. Those at the bottom of the abyss are the ones who shredded the social fabric, the social body, most perfidiously - Brutus, Cassius, Judas, and others whose decisions sowed chaos and violence. In other words, hell is peopled with those who, in ways great and small, ignore their responsibility toward others. It is populated with those who behave in such a way that their own interests, or those of their family or group are elevated at the expense of others. Dante is demonstrating just how destructive and corrosive those tendencies can be. We have only to think of the Capitol Insurrection, or the bombed out buildings of Kyiv to sense how very real Dante's social and theological analysis is.

Dante's understanding of hell follows closely the pattern that we find in the Bible, such as it is. The parables of Jesus have precisely that form of solipsism and isolation in mind. What both Dante and the Bible seem to indicate is that to the degree that you're trapped in your own self, caught up in your own private concerns, isolated from the needs of the world around you, you're already living in hell. And what both Jesus and Dante seem to be saying is that the consequences of that isolation can be catastrophic for the life of the world, especially when those patterns are replicated not only among individuals, but distributed throughout the ethos of a whole culture, which is what the *Inferno* is diagnosing. Indeed, it may be that such disfigurements of soul and spirit produce consequences that persist long after we die. It may even be that we carry them with us into all eternity.

What Dante, and what Jesus, seem to be saying is that it need not be that way. We need not yield to our worst tendencies. The *Inferno* and the parables of damnation alike were written from within a furnace - not unlike our own - that produced hellish consequences. They are writings intended to help us gaze upon that of which we are all capable, to gaze upon that of which we all are somehow complicit, and to plead that it could be, that it should be, otherwise. That's why Dante went on to write two more parts of his dramatic poem, to show what it would mean to heal from our most disfiguring tendencies, and finally, to overcome them entirely. He goes on to imagine what a life given to love, to a regard for others, might actually be like. Like Jesus himself, Dante depicts what a world governed by joy, by mutual concern, by friendship, by art and music, by shared purpose and by communal celebration might actually be like. That's why I hope that in future years, we might first ascend Mt. Purgatory with Dante and Virgil, and then enter the realm of Paradise. Far from being other-worldly, this is a vision concerned with the world as it is, as we know and experience it. What both Dante and the Bible offer to us is the assurance - a theological assurance, a political assurance, an eschatological assurance - that a better world is possible.

But what, finally, of that persistent and nagging Christian concept, of the sheep and the goats divided and judged at the end of time? I confess I don't fully know, nor am I interested in speculating upon it. But let us say this: maybe that judgment is willed less by God than by us, such that, in the end, we arrive wherever our deepest and most firmly held desires have led us.

While not a voice I'm often inclined to draw from, C.S. Lewis may have given us the best example of what hell might be. In the final volume of the Narnia series, the world undergoes a great and wonderful transformation, revealing itself as a paradise of sorts. But in one small

corner of that paradise, a group of dwarves huddle, unable to trust, or to see, the splendor around them. To them, the world is a small, cold and dank stable from which they refuse to emerge, despite assurances that it need not be that way. Over and over again they say to those who wish to persuade them: "The dwarves are for the dwarves."

And doesn't that describe an important truth of the human condition? There is such splendor around us, but too often, we fall into the trap of imagining the world, and our own lives within it, as brutish and cold. Imagine it that way for long enough, and it will become so. Conversely, when we learn to imagine ourselves as connected, as sharing in a common project, as given to one another in acts of hospitality and care, as responsible for lives and peoples other than our own - when we begin to imagine our lives in such a way, hell itself is shattered, and we begin to see the splendor of light all around us.

In our opening hymn, we sang the words of St. Ambrose of Milan, who Dante meets after he has left the Inferno, and after he has ascended the mountain of Purgatory. The final words, then, shall be given to Ambrose: "O Splendor of God's glory bright, O thou that bringest light from light, O light of light, light's living spring, all our days illumining."

May such light allow us to see the splendor that is already all about us. Amen.