

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 27, 2017

“Cruise Ship or Battle Ship?”

Matthew 16:13-20

There is a story about a poor guy who died. Much to his surprise he was sentenced not to heaven, but to Satan’s domain. Before he was admitted, however, he was interviewed by Satan himself. “it’s pretty bad down there, isn’t it?” asked the man. “Not at all,” said Satan. “You’re surrounded by people who know how to enjoy! Each day we have theme. Monday, for example, is Party Day! We party around the clock. Tuesday is Alcohol Day! An open bar, take all you want! Wednesday is Tobacco Day! The finest Havana Cigars, all the best cigarette blends. The guy begins to brighten up. He says, “I’m sold. Let me in.” They let him in the gate and he promptly falls into a fiery pit where he’s prodded by a nasty looking thing with a pitchfork. “Hey,” he cried, “what happened to those Theme Days?” “Today is Thursday,” Satan giggles. “Thursdays we tell lies.”

I guess if you expect Satan to tell you the truth, you are in for a rude surprise. Let’s talk about hell just a few moments. According to a Harris Poll taken a few years ago, more than one-third of adults worry “a lot” about not having enough money and health insurance. However, fewer than 10% worry that they will go to hell. In fact, while the majority of Americans believe in heaven and eventually expect to end up there, studies show most people today don’t believe in hell.

A young woman discovered that she was adopted. Almost immediately, she begins looking for her biological mother and father. She is stunned to discover that as a baby she had been taken from her parents when they were sent to prison for murder. Although the father died in prison, the mother was soon to be released on parole. After getting acquainted with her mother, the young woman arranges for her mother to move into an apartment with her. Interestingly enough, the mother wants to attend church services, something the daughter was not accustomed to doing. But out of friendship she accompanies her mother to services. One Sunday the pastor says something in his sermon about hell. Later, as the mother and daughter talk, the daughter says, “But you can’t believe in hell.” The mother replies gravely, “You can once you’ve been in it.” She spoke from experience. There are people who know what it is to live in hell, for they have been there.

Our story for today begins like this: “When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi...” This is significant. Caesarea Philippi was on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. It was the center of Baal worship. In fact, there were 14 different temples to the god Baal. We often think that the only exposure to religious faith that the people of Jesus’ time experienced was the Jewish faith. But Jesus was from Galilee, a province in the northern part of Palestine where there still were pockets of people who worshiped other gods besides Yahweh. Caesarea Philippi was one of these places that still included Baal worship. Also, the entire land was ruled by the Romans and a common expression was “Caesar is Lord.”

Set in that context, Jesus most famous question takes a new meaning. He was asking his disciples “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” His disciples replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” And, of course, it was Simon Peter who blurted out, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” In the midst of the pagan gods of that region and the state god of Rome there lived one who was Lord over all and his name was Jesus. Jesus responded with high praise for Simon Peter. “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because no human has revealed this to you. Rather my Father in heaven has shown you. I tell you that you are Peter. And I build my church on this rock. The gates of hell won’t stand against it.” “The gates of hell...” The imagery suggests an empire of death and decay, and all that is destructive in this world is attacking the church. And here is the promise, the gates of hell cannot stand against God’s elect.

Pastor Wayne Cordero was once invited to take helm of a battleship. He stood on this massive ship and he looked out at all the sailors. Then an order came for the sailors to assume their battle stations. Immediately sailors were scurrying around all over the deck. Finally, they all stood at their posts. Pastor Cordero looked over these 800 sailors as though he was the captain. He was amazed that each one knew exactly where they should be, exactly what they should do, exactly when they should do it. A few weeks later he had the pleasure of being on a ship again, this time a cruise ship. As he walked around the different decks, he started thinking about the difference of his experience on the battle ship and the cruise ship.

I’d like you to contrast the difference between the two—the battle ship and the cruise ship. You wonder why? There are many church people who think their church is a cruise ship, whereas Christ called us a battle ship. There are people who think church is about having their own personal needs met—their needs for fellowship, for worship, for

spiritual growth and comfort. That is all needed to become a strong Christian. And, if our cruise ship doesn't measure up, why they'll just look for the one that does. These are people who simply come to church. There is a difference between coming to church and being the church. When you are the church you're taking a different attitude.

Instead of looking at the church where you can have your needs met, you begin to look at church as a place where you can meet the needs of those for whom Christ died, those who are oppressed, those who hunger both physically and spiritually, those who are lonely and in pain. Suddenly your cruise ship becomes a battle ship and the enemy are all the forces of hell, decay, destruction and death.

I have to confess that I don't know much about heaven and hell, at least the biblical version. I'm glad, because of Christ's sacrifice in my behalf, I don't have to worry about my eternal destination. But I do know that there are people in our very community who are in torment, there are people whose pain is unceasing, there are people who have been in hell for many years and remain captive there today. There are people for whom the gospel is indeed great good news. And there are people who need what we have to offer. Where does a person turn in such times? We turn to God. We turn to God's church. There are homeless people prowling the streets of every city in this country. Who is going to help them? The government throws up its hands in despair. The courts put them back on the streets. Who is left to care about them? Only one group of people, the church.

There are families being torn apart. Young lives being shattered by drugs and alcohol abuse. Old folks with no one to care about them. Who is responsible for these people? You! Me! All who are soldiers of the cross. Those of you who want our church to be a beacon to a sick and dying world. Those of you who want your church to make a difference. That's why you serve in the ministries of our church. That's why you give support to its causes. "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." That's who we are. That's what we're about. Still thinking you're on a cruise ship? Waiting for the porter to come and fluff your pillow? Good luck.

Wesley United Methodist Church is a battle ship. "Ladies and Gentlemen, take your battle stations. Full speed ahead."