

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B  
The Rev. Ian Burch  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
September 25, 2021

Imagine my surprise and disappointment, when, at age 22 I found myself no longer on my parents' wonderful vision insurance and instead on public insurance that had no vision benefits. My eyes had not gotten any better, but my ability to care for them had much diminished.

I found myself saving my odd job money while I was in school and going about every two years to the eye doctor to pay for glasses out of pocket. And if you have ever paid for an exam and new glasses out of pocket while working a part-time job, you know that it's a massive expense.

Finally, after college and seminary, I found myself fully employed and holding my fancy new vision benefit card. I raced down to the eye doctor and got a very cute pair of glasses and have been getting a new pair every year ever since.

But something happened a few years ago. I started thinking; you know, it would be really nice if I could also have a pair of contacts handy so that I could wear my sunglasses when it's really bright out. And so, instead of just going to the eye doctor for glasses, I would also have her fit me for contacts. It was a little more expensive, but not too bad.

A couple of years passed, and you know what? I started thinking: what if instead of putting the contacts on whenever I wanted to wear sunglasses, I could instead have a second pair of glasses that were prescription sunglasses. And I figured that would be way more convenient for me. And so, I started to go to the eye doctor not just for glasses, but also for contacts as well as prescription sunglasses. Sure, it was a little more expensive, but not too bad.

And so, just last week, my brand new and very handsome prescription sunglasses were finished, and I took them on a test drive down to Chicago for a funeral I had to do on a very sunny day. And they worked perfectly. They were everything I had ever wanted. When the sun came out, I just switched out my regular glasses for sunglasses, and it was perfect. No messy contact solution, just an easy transition.

I finished the funeral and drove home, smiling in the sun with my prescription sunglasses. I park the car. I put my new sunglasses in their case and stash them in the glovebox of the car. I walk into my front door and am greeted by a dog who wants a walk. So I put his leash on him and go across the street to the park. But you know what, it's still really sunny out. And I think to myself: my new sunglasses are way back in the glove box of my car. You know what? May I should have

TWO pairs of prescription sunglasses — one for the car and one for dog walking. Sure, it might be a little more expensive, but not too bad.

I managed to go from absolute gratitude at having access to glasses to thinking that I needed to have glasses, contacts, and two pairs of sunglasses. Which is, on its face, kind of insane. But I also think that it is our contemporary version of hell.

Jesus talks quite a bit about hell in today's gospel. It's not a topic that we talk a lot about in the Episcopal church, and I will tell you frankly that I am not terribly interested in a fire-filled land of demons and torture like Dante writes about. But I am really interested in the different ways that we can make hell real for ourselves or for each other.

My example was sort of silly, but I think that this voice inside that tells us that we do not have enough, that we are not doing enough, that we are simply not enough is one of the ways that we create a hell on this earth. If God is abundance, as the scriptures say, then hell, as a manifestation of God's absence, must feel like endless hunger, need, consumption, and distress.

What is it like when we are taught we will never have enough to satisfy — money, things, sex, affection, affirmation, or status? Because the secret is that none of it will provide the kind of contentment that comes from resting in the abundance of God's love. There are very well-paid people out in the world whose job it is to convince you that you are missing out on something, that you have material needs that you were not aware of. And we are susceptible to those whispers. When we begin to believe those voices of scarcity, then we are co-workers in the creation of a little hell of desire for ourselves.

The antidote, or I could call it the anti-hell, is, of course, God. In Alcoholics Anonymous, they say that there is a God-shaped hole in all of our hearts, and I think this is true. The problem is that we try to fill it with lots of things that aren't the right shape, then what we need is some time in quiet contemplation with our God.

I did an experiment the other day: I took a walk through the park without my phone. It seems like a silly thing to think about, but I had noticed that I'd been spending more time than I wanted checking for messages, looking at social media apps, etc.. And you know what I found when I was walking without my phone? I started to notice the trees in their earliest stages of change for the fall. And, you might find this hard to believe, but I found myself alternating talking to God and even humming some tunes I remember from church as a kid. All because I created the space to listen to my true longings instead of the ones served up to me on my iPhone.

I do not spend a lot of time worrying about my immortal soul being tortured for eternity like in some medieval painting. But I do worry very much about the hell of my own making that follows me around in the form of an unquenchable thirst for more, better, faster, and tastier.

My prayer for myself and for you is that this week you can find spaces to notice where there are places in your life where you feel the need for God. And also to notice the things in your life that you might be leaning on too much. Are they really helping you create a life closer to the divine? Or are they helping you create a little hell in your own mind?

Jesus teaches us to pray “give us today our daily bread,” and I think this is ancient wisdom and grace. The bread from God is enough for your needs. The grace of God is enough for your needs. The goodness of God is enough for your needs. Everything else is a beautiful lie. You really don’t need three pairs of glasses.

So, by all means, reject hell. Just make sure you know what hell looks like in your own life. It might be a little glossier than we’ve been led to believe. But remember that hell has only the power we give it, and that we belong to God before we belong to anyone else. As Jesus says today in the gospel. Be at peace. Amen.