

Our Only Hope

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Sermon for August 28, 2005

Lessons for Pentecost 15 [17]

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalms 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

On September 26, 2001 an article appeared on the website of the satirical newspaper **The Onion** entitled "Hijackers Surprised to Find Themselves In Hell." It gave a detailed description of the temporary tortures awaiting the September 11 hijackers in the Islamic version of Hell while Underworld officials decided on a permanent fate. It was deliciously, cathartically funny and I found myself shouting "Amen," "That's right," and "Yeah!" to each graphic description of what the hijackers could possibly be facing, and that I wanted so much to be true. I laughed so hard that I cried, and it was wonderful to finally be crying over something that was funny.

My laughter eventually turned to concern as I considered the words from today's lesson from Romans: "Pray for those who hate you."

Even them?

Yes. Even them.

And then, as I thought about it more, I thought of the possible mindset of the

hijackers and I was brought back to, of all things, the old TV show **Hogan's Heroes**.

I was a big **Hogan's Heroes** fan when I was a kid, and tried never to miss it on a Saturday night. Yet, as much as I enjoyed the show, I knew that there were people who had some criticisms of it. The most serious criticism was that it showed Germans as actual human beings with feelings, foibles, and senses of humor, rather than the evil monsters we knew them to truly be.

And yet, even at 12 years old, I realized that showing them as people like us, but just on the wrong side, made the Germans even more scary, because if it could happen to them, it could happen to anyone.

The Germans on **Hogan's Heroes** made me look at the hijackers not as one-dimensional, soulless monsters, but as real people who may have been misled into thinking they were doing the right thing.

But do I still have to pray for them? Do they even deserve my praying for them?

You know what the answer is, but you may not be prepared for the reason behind the answer.

As I thought about them as actual human beings, and the surprise that **The Onion** said that they were sure to get, I thought about why they would be surprised. There would be no reason for them to be surprised if they knew in their hearts that they were doing something unspeakably evil. The only reason for them to be surprised would be if they honestly thought they were doing the will of God and would be rewarded. And then I realized why I had to pray for them.

Because their only hope is my only hope.

I know that I'm not perfect. I know that the good that I would do, I do not, and the evil I would avoid, somehow gets done by me anyway. I know that my good intentions often come to nothing. And I know that way too often I totally misunderstand what God wants and likely bungle the job.

I know that if I were misled into doing some unspeakable evil in God's name, only to find out later on that it wasn't what God had in mind at all, I'd want my intentions rather than my actions taken into account. I know that I'd want God to forgive me for failing him even though I did the best I could with the information I was given.

My only hope at all is that God sees our intents and not our futile and often tragic efforts (although I have to say that a little more clarity on his part would go a long way to avoiding some of these problems in the first place).

My only hope is that God is as gracious and forgiving as we say we believe that he is.

And if God is, then he is the only hope of the September 11 hijackers and people of all religions, including Christianity, who believe that their duty is to destroy the enemies of their faith.

And so we pray for those who hate us. Not necessarily that in the end they'll get off easily, but instead, that they'll truly understand what they've done and be able to accept the forgiveness that's offered to them.

But wait, there's more.

The best part of the article in **The Onion** was that the hijackers were enduring their tortures within clear sight of the Paradise they thought they would be entering, and probably watching those that they took with them entering Paradise instead of them.

In the article, Praxitas, Duke of the Willingly Led Astray, is quoted as saying, "It might actually be the most painful thing we can do, to show these murderers the untold pleasures that would have awaited them in Paradise, if only they had lived pious lives."

Again, it was cathartically funny, and was something I could easily go with, were it not for something else from today's lesson:

If your enemy is hungry feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink. For in doing so, you will heap coals of fire on his head.

In case you didn't know, I come from a very manipulative family, and I definitely know how to play mind games with people in order to eventually get what I want. I try, however, to only use my powers for good.

I've always liked this passage because I can see the mind games it involves. I've often thought that the worst thing you can do to someone who knows they've done something wrong is to forgive them and be done with it. Punishment they expect and know how to deal with. Forgiveness is different. They either won't believe that it's real, and will always be looking over their shoulder, waiting for you to finally give it to them with both barrels; or they'll really understand and the pain will be unbearable.

Think about it from your own lives. The worst thing your parents could possibly ever say to you was, "You've disappointed us." Especially when you knew you had done wrong. I'm not talking about simply breaking some rule you knew existed, but didn't agree with, I'm talking about when you knew that you had truly done wrong and that your parents were truly disappointed in you for doing so.

Now suppose that after all that, instead of immediately punishing you, your parents then stressed how much they still loved you, and forgave you. Yes, there's some small percentage of people who would say, "Yeah, I got over!" But most of us would feel even worse. Feeling that we didn't deserve the grace they were showing us. We would rather have been punished and gotten it overwith than to have to deal with the fact that they had forgiven us. Forgiveness is often more than we can handle receiving as well as giving.

For in doing so, you will heap coals of fire on his head.

The manipulative person I am can't help but think of how painful it would be first of all, to realize with all your soul that you had horribly disappointed God, and then to find out that he had forgiven you. It would almost be too much to bear.

Then how about the forgiveness of all the people you were responsible for killing? People who you knew had every reason to hate you. Wouldn't it be totally unbearable to have them not only forgive you, but treat you kindly?

Is it possible that Hell could be Heaven? That Hell could be being surrounded by the people you've wronged in life, but who forgive you in death? Talk about heaping coals of fire on someone's head!

It seems that contrary to what Praxitas says, the most painful thing would not be to have the hijackers suffering in the sight of the Paradise they had hoped to enter themselves, but to have them actually in Paradise, surrounded by the love of those whose deaths they were responsible for, and knowing how disappointed God was with their actions.

It all seems deliciously wonderful. Can we possibly be blamed for torturing someone with kindness and forgiveness? If we're going to eternally torture someone, isn't that the way to do it?

And if this really is kosher, then where do I sign up? Because I'm from North Jersey and I still want a piece of these guys.

Yet, as much as the manipulative aspect of it appeals to me, I eventually have to admit that that's not the point either. We shouldn't be using forgiveness intentionally as a form of torture. Because if we are

praying for them as we should be, we're praying for them to repent and to be able to accept the gift of God's forgiveness, which I said earlier was the only hope that any of us have.

So then what of our very human emotions, that are still rather raw almost four years later? How do we reconcile the feelings we have as humans with what is the only hope any of us have? Can we hope that they are tortured by forgiveness forever without possibly wishing the same fate on ourselves for something we did with the best of intentions?

After all, do I want to be judged at the wise old age of 49 for the wrongs I did at age 12 or 22, when I was young and stupid? Things I'm now embarrassed to even remember having done?

Well, I'll tell you how I look at it. It may not be the best theological solution, but it works for me at the moment until God decides to give me a better plan.

I figure that all those who died in the September 11 attacks have already forgiven

the hijackers. It's those of us left behind and who still have to live with the memory that continue to suffer. And I figure it'll take a good 100 years for the last person who remembers, or was directly affected by the attacks to finally die and be able to fully forgive too.

If the hijackers continue to suffer, whether from the tortures described in **The Onion**, or from unbearable forgiveness, until that last person dies, what is 100 years out of an eternity?

And so even though an incredibly large part of me wants to know that they're suffering for what they did, I don't want it to be forever, and I pray for them.

And all of my enemies.

Because their only hope is my only hope.

And yours.

This is most certainly true.