

This Day Shalt Thy Soul be Required of Thee
Homily for the Ninth Sunday of Luke
Luke 12:16-21

In 2007, the famous New York City real estate developer and hotel magnate Leona Helmsley died of natural causes, leaving behind a fortune estimated to be between five and eight billion dollars. For reasons “known to them”, and to her alone, Helmsley purposely left nothing to her two grandchildren, Craig and Meegan. She did, however, establish a tail wagging \$12 million dollar trust fund for her eight year old dog, “Trouble.”

Of course the will was contested, and once the (gold) dust settled, Trouble’s inheritance was reduced to only \$2 million dollars. Craig and Meegan were awarded \$5 million each.

Even though she was somewhat dogged by this financial setback, Trouble managed to enjoy her reduced portion for her remaining years. She was flown to Sarasota, Florida, where she remained in private quarters in the luxury Sandcastle Hotel. Her yearly budget included such things as \$60,000 for her guardian, \$8,000 for grooming fees, \$1,200 for food, and oh yes – \$100,000 was soon added for round the clock security. This latter expense became necessary due to the great number of death and kidnapping threats that soon began flooding in.

Beware of Covetousness

Once again, the central theme of our Gospel reading is eternal life: What is its price? How do we attain it? What pitfalls must we avoid. And the grain of sand that produced the pearl of wisdom in the parable of the foolish rich man was . . . you guessed it . . . a dispute over an inheritance.

It all began with an argument between two brothers over the proper distribution of a family inheritance. (This part of the story comes just before our Gospel reading takes off). Our Lord was confronted with a man who shouted out to Him: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

He didn’t exactly get the results he was hoping for. Instead, our Lord reproved him sternly saying, “Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?”

What presumption! This would be like someone writing to the Supreme Court and asking them to rule on a personal dispute about a parking ticket! Saint Ambrose comments: “He who descended for a divine purpose fittingly declines earthly tasks and does not allow himself to be a judge of lawsuits and an arbitrator of riches. He is to judge the living and the dead and apportion deserts. **You must not consider what you seek but from whom you request it.**”

I'll say!

To make matters worse, our Lord spoke publically to those standing around "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."

From this grain of sand comes the costly pearl in the oyster – the story of the rich fool.

The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

We encounter this sobering story every year as we begin the Nativity fast. The message and intent is clear and unavoidable. In fact, it is spelled out by no less than the Lord Himself:

Let this rich man be a warning: life is brief, and if we waste our time storing up earthly goods, we impoverish our soul in the process. (Andrew Carnegie once said "He who dies rich dies disgraced." - He did give away a fortune – but also died with an estimated worth of some 13.6 billion dollars in today's terms." – Just saying . . .)

Our Lord did not equivocate. Unless we change our priorities, we, like the rich man, will be wealthy in earthly possessions, but paupers towards God.

Who's Got the Keys?

I want to finish up today on my series about eternity – heaven and hell. Two weeks ago, we heard St. Gregory of Nyssa commenting on the gulf existing between Lazarus (the faithful) and the rich man (fallen humanity). In very Orthodox fashion, he stated that this gulf was not of God's own design. It was not written into the original blueprints for His perfect creation. Instead, we – all of us - have helped to hollow out that gulf of separation “like some deep and trackless pit.” Adam and Eve began the process through their original sin, and they found themselves standing outside the Garden of Eden as a consequence. Each one of us adds to that trough through our own sin, and in so doing, we dig the pit a little deeper - both for ourselves, and for all humanity.

C.S. Lewis put it well when he wrote that: “The gates of Hell are locked from the inside.” (The Great Divorce). That is a very Orthodox understanding of Hell. But even though this changes the equation radically, there is still one reality that we cannot overlook even in this paradigm. From an eternal standpoint, it doesn't really matter so much THAT the doors are locked from the inside as it

matters that they ARE locked. A gulf is fixed. A separation exists between God and fallen humanity. And that is a great tragedy.

So now we must ask: will those doors remain locked for Eternity? Will the unrepentant realize their foolishness in some distant aeon, repent, or at the very least, recognize the price of their stubbornness, and come running through those unlocked doors into the Light of heaven, and the embrace of a loving God. Will they one day join the faithful in everlasting worship at the throne of the Holy Trinity?

In other words, is hell eternal?

Before I begin this part of my homily, let me start with a quote from the noted Orthodox theologian Metropolitan Kallistos Ware. This comes at the end of his discussion: “Dare we Hope for the Salvation of All?”. Here is how he concludes: “When I am waiting at Oxford Station for the train to London, sometimes I walk up to the northernmost stretch of the long platform until I reach a notice: ‘Passengers must not proceed beyond this point. Penalty 50 pounds.’”

He closes on this note as a way of reminding his readers – especially inquiring theologians – that in approaching subjects such as this, there is a point beyond which no one must proceed. Such mysteries are hidden deep in the infinite Mind of the Creator, and though we might speculate about them, we can go so far and

no farther. God is the Judge. He doesn't need our opinion. When God asked Job "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding." Job's response was classic: "What answer will I give to these things? I will put my hand over my mouth. I have spoken once. I will not do so a second time."

With that important preface in mind, I will venture to take this subject to another level. Last week I mentioned to you a book I have been reading in preparation for this series of messages on Eternity. The book is called "Unquenchable Fire: *The Traditional Christian Teaching about Hell*, and the author is Father Lawrence Farley (published by Ancient Faith Publishing). I obviously don't have the time in one brief series of homilies to cover every point, but I would encourage anyone interested in the topic to obtain a copy and to read it carefully (If you are interested, talk with Kh. Carla about this book. She has an inside track with Ancient Faith!).

In *Unquenchable Fire*, Father Lawrence seeks not to explain this doctrine from his own viewpoint, but in true Orthodox fashion, examines it through a number of important lenses. He looks at this subject objectively - as taught by Christ in the Gospels. Then he examines the writings of, the Apostles, especially Saint Paul and of course Saint John, author of the Apocalypse (Revelation). Next he takes us through the lens of Church history, citing many highly

respected Church Fathers, old and new, whose opinions and teachings are normative. He examines the doctrine through the lens of the Church's iconography, and also through her hymnology. He answers some common questions at criticisms which are brought up against it. And finally he sums everything up in one final chapter.

Let me read you a few lines from that final, summary chapter. In his conclusion: "A New Day and Another Gospel", he states the following "Our life in this age is poised between darkness and light, between doom and salvation, and we live our life on the razor's edge between two eternal alternatives. That is why our choices matter and why struggle is crucial. That is why the New Testament is filled with apostolic warnings to avoid the terrible possibility of apostasy and with encouragements to persevere in our faith. Either glory or disaster awaits all the children of men, and every day brings us closer to either unshakable joy or everlasting misery. The stakes could not be higher. The mere fact of being alive itself brings awful responsibility."

As much as we might down deep inside hope for a third option, the evidence provided in this book is very convincing. Our Lord reserved some of His strongest language for warning us about the realities of hell, and the never ending nature of its existence.

Not ONCE did He express the view that hell was simply a figure of speech or a hollow scare tactic – a boogey man invented to keep people in line. Not once did He offer hope that in the end everyone would be given a “get in free” pass, or that eternity didn’t really mean eternity for the lost. Some of the strongest language concerning this reality comes straight from our Lord Himself.

Think for a moment about His warning regarding the separation of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25; His parables such as the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man which we read a few weeks ago, the Great Wedding Feast, the Ten Virgins, The Unjust Steward. Consider His choice of terms in referring to hell as a place of “outer darkness”, a place where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” where offenders will be turned “over to the torturers”. We may blanch at the sermons of Jonathan Edwards (who preached the famous “Sinners in the hands of an angry God”.) Before we throw too many rocks his direction, however, we really need to consider the words of our Lord.

As I said, there is no way for me to do justice to an important book in a brief Sunday morning homily. That is why I am encouraging those who would like to delve into the subject more to purchase a copy of *Unquenchable Fire*, and spend some time with it. It is sobering. I will say, however, that Father Lawrence amasses some pretty solid evidence from the sources he examines. There

have been a few Orthodox saints who seemed to leave the door open to universalism (Careful! One of the major figures was Origen who was declared to be a heretic partly as a result of his teaching!), but the VAST majority stand together in a united voice.

So what can we do?

Every Thanksgiving as we sit around the table, I think of all those I have known and loved who are no longer sharing that meal with us, but have passed from this life to the next. Sometimes I envision empty place settings arranged here and there around the table, like the “missing man formation” performed by military pilots to honor someone who has fallen in action. They are gone, but not forgotten.

So here is a final question which must be asked by every Orthodox Christian. What, if anything, can we do for those who have preceded us?

Well – if, like me, you come from a Protestant tradition, grab on to something quick before I tell you the answer. This isn’t something I heard from my Baptist pastors, or studied about in Protestant seminary.

We pray for them!

I told you to grab on to something! Why, on earth, would we do something like that? Isn’t it kind of . . . too late!

From very ancient times, the Church has always included prayers for the departed along with prayers for the living. This is by no means a novel teaching. And it is an important part of our liturgical life to this day.

First of all, we are taught to pray for Orthodox Christians who have departed this life in the hope of Resurrection and life eternal. We remember them at the time of their passing – I have prayed many a trisagion prayer at the bedside of those who have recently departed in Christ. We remember them at specific times after their death – the 40th day after their passing. Each year on the anniversary of their death. The departed in Christ are remembered every Saturday throughout the year, and during certain seasons, there are entire liturgies – Soul Saturdays – where we specifically pray for them. If possible, we visit their graves on these days – and throughout the year. And of course we remember them in our private prayers as well.

What do we pray for? Among other things, we pray for rest and repose “give rest to the soul(s) of thy departed servant(s), _____, in a place of brightness, a place of verdure, a place of repose, whence all sickness, sorrow and sighing have fled away.” But we also pray for pardon and remission of their sins? For “there is no man who lives and sins not” Why do we do that? Aren’t they already beyond that – haven’t they already made their choice?

We would say “Yes” they have already made their decision. But we would also say that we have not yet come to the Great Judgement Seat. In his helpful series of podcasts beginning in May 24th., 2007, Clark Carlton helps draw this concept into clearer focus: He reminds us that “even as we are about to receive communion, we pray for ‘a pious ending to our life, painless, blameless, and peaceful, and for a good defense before the dread judgment seat of Christ’. “In the same way” he continues, “when a brother or sister in Christ dies, we pray that he or she may be granted rest in a place of repose, even as we continue to pray for a good defense at the judgment.” (Ancient Faith Radio Podcast).

Yes, we firmly believe that no one will be saved apart from the name of Christ. Good works are worthless apart from Christ. We firmly believe that our salvation comes through faith, not of works, and that “whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16. But we also know that salvation is not punctiliar – not a point in time. We have been saved, we are being saved, and by God’s grace, we will be saved. What we do not know – and have no right to judge – is the mystery which will arise between Christ and the individual believer on that “Great and Terrible Day”.

What if the Great Judgment Seat is more than a one question “True/False” exam? “I prayed the sinners prayer and accepted

Jesus as my Lord and Savior, True or false?” Or since we are Orthodox, I should also include “I was baptized as an Orthodox Christian, True or False?” We are warned solemnly in the Scriptures that some will say “Lord Lord” on that day, but be rejected because of the failure to match faith with works? We are told by Saint James that “Faith without works is dead”.

The truth is, my brothers and sisters, we DON'T know. That is why it is called the Dread Judgment Seat OF CHRIST!. So, we pray – and continue to pray - until the Day of Judgment when all things are revealed.

And lastly, what about those who have died with an incomplete faith? What about those who died without expressing any visible signs of repentance and contrition to us? What about those who lived in a region where the Gospel of Christ had never been heard? Since we're asking tough questions, what about those who in this country came to an Orthodox Church seeking salvation, only to be turned away since they didn't speak the language and were not of the right ethnic orientation? In other words, what about the hard cases?

Again, the clear teaching of our faith is that we pray.

Every year at Pentecost, we pray the following prayer as one of the Kneeling Prayers: “[Thou] also, on this all-perfect and saving feast, dost deign to receive oblations and supplications for

those bound in Hades, and grantest unto us the great hope that rest and comfort will be sent down from Thee to the departed from the grief that binds them.”

And in addition, there are private prayers, including an Akathist which “covers *everyone*, from pious Christians to suicides to blasphemers, and asks that *all* may find forgiveness in the light of Christ’s all-embracing love.” (Carlton).

Why? For the same reason that we pray for believers. God is the Judge. He knows the questions that we cannot even ask (Pearl Harbor . . .)

Conclusion:

Trouble the lucky lap dog lived another four years before finally succumbing to illness. Unfortunately, another one of Leona Helmsley’s expectations was denied at that time. Helmsley had requested that upon his death, *Trouble* was to be buried in the family mausoleum. Alas, the cemetery declined permission for this, since it had a longstanding rule: “No dogs allowed!”

The old adage says: “You can’t take it with you.” Fortunately, that adage is not completely accurate. There is one thing we CAN take with us – one thing that goes with us into the grave and on into eternity.

What is that? Saint Ambrose of Milan tells us in his commentary on this parable. “The things that are of the world

remain in the world, and whatever riches we gather are bequeathed to our heirs . . . Only virtue is the companion of the dead. Compassion alone follows us. It is the guide to the heavens and the first of the mansions. Through the use of worthless money, it acquires eternal dwellings.” Exposition of the Gospel of Luke, Homily 7.122.

Our Lord’s warning concerning greed this morning comes to us at a good time of year. We have so much to be thankful for. God has given so much to us. What kind of stewards are we with those blessings. Will they make us “rich toward God”? Or will we become like the rich man who built barns to store the bounteous harvest, and then said: “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry”?”

Our answer to that question will follow us into eternity.

“And Jesus called out, ‘He who has ears, let him hear.’”