

What's Love Got To Do With It? “A Love That Never Stops!”

Luke 24:36-48

³⁶While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence.

⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things.”

1 John 3:1

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

I want to tell you about the “Well to Hell.” Have you heard about it? It was certainly news to me. When I was down visiting my family in Florida a week ago, a person told me about going to a friend’s church where the pastor, in all seriousness, told his congregation about a hole that had been bored in Siberia that actually descended into Hell. And he told his congregation that the people who had bored the hole had recorded the anguished screams of the people there roasting in Hell. Evidently you can hear the audio tape on various internet sites.

The effect upon the person who told me this was amazing – it seemed to be a combination of fear and belief. Not belief in a loving God, but belief in punishment if you didn’t believe this to be true. So, seeing how seriously this was being taken, and that the resulting fear was working as some form of motivation to, well, be afraid, I decided I would look into this and this is what I found.

The “Well to Hell,” I found, is a borehole in Murmansk Oblast, Russia which purportedly was drilled so deep that it broke through to hell. It’s an urban legend that has been circulating on the Internet since at least 1997. It was first mentioned in English on a 1989 broadcast by TBN, the Trinity Broadcasting Network, the largest Christian TV network, which had picked up the story from Finnish newspaper reports.

The story holds that the Siberians had drilled a hole that was nine miles deep before breaking through to a cavity. TBN declared that scientists had discovered that the earth is actually hollow! These scientists then supposedly lowered an extremely heat

tolerant microphone, along with other sensory equipment, into the well. The temperature deep within was a 2,000° Fahrenheit. And from this chamber of fire they said screams of the damned could be heard.

Now the truth: some people had, in fact, drilled a hole almost eight miles deep in the Kola Superdeep Borehole, and found some interesting geological anomalies, although they reported no supernatural encounters. Temperatures reached 360° Fahrenheit, making deeper drilling prohibitively expensive.

United States tabloids soon ran the story, and sound files from the damned began appearing on various sites across the Internet. The story eventually made its way to the TBN, which broadcasted it, claiming it to be “proof” of the literal existence of Hell. When contacted, a TBN spokeswoman said, “Oh yes, it’s true all right. We’ve got documentation. It’s in our latest newsletter.”

What is this documentation? Åge Rendalen, a Norwegian teacher, had heard the original story eagerly promoted on TBN during a visit to the U.S. Disgusted with what he perceived to be mass gullibility, he decided to test TBN’s integrity. He wrote to the network, originally claiming that he disbelieved the tale but that, upon his return to Norway, he read a “factual account” of the story. According to Rendalen, the “story” claimed not only that the cursed well was real, but that a bat-like apparition had risen out of it before blazing a trail across the Russian sky.

As ‘proof,’ Rendalen deliberately mistranslated a Norwegian article – an insignificant piece about a local building inspector – and tried to make it unbelievable. He submitted both this fabricated story and the “translation” to TBN, along with a letter which included his real name, phone number, and address, as well as those of a pastor friend who knew about the hoax and had agreed to expose it to anyone who called seeking verification.

Had TBN made one phone call to verify the story, they easily would have discovered that it was a hoax. However, Rendalen’s story was never verified. It was aired story as proof of the original broadcast. Now this is being cited as truth in various churches across the country and used as a coercive scare-tactic to induce a fear of hell and, evidently, from that, a belief in God.

Against this background, place this fear-inducing tale side-by-side with today’s scripture from John about the resurrection appearance of Jesus. Wouldn’t seeing Jesus after his crucifixion scare the bejebbers out of you? But when the disciples were startled and shocked, thinking they were seeing a ghost, does Jesus say “Now you’re scared! That’s good! Just wait until you see what other horrors are in store for you!” No! Jesus seeks to calm their fears, saying, “Peace be with you... Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?”

I hope you see this. The last thing Jesus wants is for them to be frightened. He wants them to see his love for them and for them to reconnect with their love for him. He’s showing them, in effect, that his love, God’s love is not dead. It’s a love that not even death can conquer. It’s a love that will never end. And when they see that he’s for

real – not a ghostly apparition – they are filled with joy. Out of this joyful re-connection with Christ’s love, the church was born. Not out of fear or horror or terror.

So let me ask you, “What does love have to do with it?” What does love have to do with our faith, our belief, our lives? Love has everything to do with it! Love has everything to do with whether we believe or don’t believe in Jesus Christ. Love has everything to do with whether we are empowered to give our lives for others – with whether we give our time helping with a Gleaner’s food distribution, or helping out with the Interfaith Hospitality Network, or participating in an immigration clinic with Justice for Our Neighbors, or getting up early to help with the Work Program. Love has everything to do with whether you choose to be here this morning instead of going grocery shopping. If it’s worth doing, worth investing yourself, worth giving yourself, worth giving your substance, love has everything to do with it!

I remember what William Sloane Coffin said years ago. “Hate is not the opposite of love,” Bill said, “Fear is the opposite of love. Love sets us free! Fear places us in bondage.” If your primary motivation is fear, I’d strongly suggest that you have your faith checked out. Because love has everything to do with believing in and being led by God. Fear? Fear is the very opposite of the love of God.

Now, you need to know this about me. I am not motivated by fear. I would rather be lured by love than driven by fear any day. I’d rather be led by faith and hope than blackmailed by dread. But I’m a real sucker when I see love shining in a person pure and clear. It’s a clear reflection of God. To me, one of the most powerful insights in the scriptures is found in 1 John 4 where we’re told: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear! For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”

What does love have to do with it? If God is love, then love has everything to do with our lives. God is love – a love that never ends! What does fear have to do with it? Absolutely nothing. For fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

Earlier this month, Hallmark presented a TV show about a remarkable retired social worker named Irena Sendler from Poland. Irena Sendler was led by a love that cast out her fear! She was born in 1910 in Otwock, a town some 15 miles southeast of Warsaw. She was greatly influenced by her father. As a doctor his patients were mostly poor Jews. In 1939, Germany invaded Poland, and the brutality of the Nazis accelerated with murder, violence, and terror. At the time, Irena was a Senior Administrator in the Warsaw Social Welfare Department, which operated the canteens in every district of the city. Previously, the canteens provided meals, financial aid, and other services for orphans, the elderly, the poor, and the destitute. Now, through Irena, the canteens also provided clothing, medicine, and money for the Jews. They were registered under fictitious Christian names, and to prevent inspections, the Jewish families were reported as being afflicted with such highly infectious diseases as typhus and tuberculosis.

But in 1942, the Nazis herded hundreds of thousands of Jews into a 16-block area that came to be known as the Warsaw Ghetto. The Ghetto was sealed and the Jewish families ended up behind its walls, only to await certain death. This little Catholic lady, Irena Sendler, was so appalled by the conditions that she joined Żegota, the Council for Aid to Jews, organized by the Polish underground resistance movement, as one of its first recruits and directed the efforts to rescue Jewish children.

To be able to enter the Ghetto legally, Irena managed to get a pass from Warsaw's Epidemic Control Department and she visited the Ghetto daily, reestablished contacts, and brought food, medicines, and clothing. But 5,000 people a month were dying from starvation and disease in the Ghetto, and she decided to help the Jewish children to get out.

Each day when she entered the ghetto Irena Sendler wore a star armband as a sign of her solidarity with the Jews. She began smuggling children out in an ambulance. Some children were taken out in gunnysacks or body bags. Some were buried inside loads of goods. A mechanic took a baby out in his toolbox. Some kids were carried out in potato sacks, others were placed in coffins. But it all was too slow. Too many children were dying.

It was then that Irena called on the church. Here was a chance for her fellow Christians to become the people Christ was calling them to be. In the Ghetto there was a small church that had two entrances. One entrance opened into the Ghetto, the other opened into the Aryan side of Warsaw. The children entered the church as Jews and exited as Christians. There was no baptism or ceremony. They became "temporary" followers of Jesus. Irena Sendler accomplished her incredible deeds with the active assistance of the church. "I sent most of the children to the churches," she recalled. "I knew I could count on them." Irena had a remarkable record of cooperation from Christians when placing the youngsters: "No one ever refused to take a child from me," she said. The children were given false Christian identities and placed in new homes.

Irena Sendler carefully noted, in coded form, the children's original names and their new identities. She kept the only record of their true identities in jars buried beneath an apple tree in a neighbor's back yard, across the street from German barracks, hoping she could someday dig up the jars, locate the children and inform them of their past. Eventually, she was captured by the Nazis and severely punished for her actions. But even under extreme torture, she refused to reveal where the lists of the smuggled Jewish children were hidden.

Irena said the test came each time she walked through the doors of that little church. Would some Christian person be there to meet her and the child she was trying to save? Irena walked through that door two thousand five hundred times. And two thousand five hundred times a Christian met her there ready to take a child into their home at great personal risk.

When the war ended 90% of the original Jewish parents were dead, killed by the Nazis. Many of the children remained in their temporary Christian families for the rest of their lives. And every child who walked through the doors of that church found a place

to become the person God created them to be. In her honor, a beautiful tree was planted in her honor at Yad Vashem, the holocaust memorial in Jerusalem.

Why did she risk her life and endure torture to do this? For the love of God and the love of children, she said. Love had everything to do with it! She loved because Christ had first loved her. And she knew that a loving God awaited her even if she lost her life in this world.

I wonder – and I hope you ask yourself – what might you do on this earth if God’s perfect love cast out your fear?

As we come to Christ’s table today, remember what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; for that is what we are.