

A woman was sitting in the waiting room for her first appointment with a new dentist. She happened to notice his Dental School diploma, which bore his full name. Suddenly, she remembered that a tall, handsome, dark-haired boy with the same name had been in her high school class some 40-odd years before. Could he be the same fellow that she had a secret crush on, way back then?

Upon seeing him, however, she quickly discarded any such thought. The balding, gray-haired man with the deeply lined face was way, way too old to have been her classmate. After he examined her teeth, she got up the courage to ask him if he had by any chance attended Morgan Park High School. "Yes. Yes, I did," he gleamed with pride. "I'm a Morgan Mustang."

"When did you graduate?" she asked. He answered, "In 1959. Why do you ask?" "You were in my class!" she exclaimed. He looked at her closely and then asked, "What did you teach?"

Today's gospel has 2 different but complementary tendencies at work. On the one hand, Jesus commends an inclusive and as open as possible approach to judging who is IN and who is OUT. The test for the in and the out, at least, in this passage, is neither doctrinal nor theological. It is ethical. Those who are kind (9:40), offering something to a person in need – the example is a cup of cold water – will be rewarded because "Whoever is not against us is for us."

But then the ethical discussion is intensified and Jesus stresses the dire consequences of causing 'one of these little ones who believe in me' to sin. The text is clearly about how the world ought to treat Jesus' disciples, and, by implication, how people ought to treat one another.

What gets us in this text is Jesus' exaggerated assault on our senses as He discusses the consequences of anyone who leads others astray.

We live in a permissive age in which people are quick to blame, claim victimhood, and slow to accept any responsibility. Someone sues McDonald's because her coffee was too hot and she chose to drive with the coffee in her hand. Smokers launched a multimillion-dollar claim against the tobacco companies, claiming that cigarettes had injured them and they were seeking compensation. But prominent warnings have been on packs of cigarettes since the early 60's, but these smokers claimed that they were deceived about the health risks. I'm not a fan of tobacco companies, but there is something wrong about a society in which people are so quick to blame and so slow to accept responsibility for the choices that they have made in their lives. And parents are often passing this directly on to their kids, making it worse. When a child misbehaves at school most parents these days assume it's the teacher's fault. I've heard parents say "My child would never do that." But I was a high school teacher – and yes, their child DID that – right in front of my eyes! We judge most of our actions on the basis of their effect on ourselves rather than our actions' effects upon others. Today's gospel is a counter-testimonial to such thinking.

Two conclusions can be made from this gospel. First, though Jesus forgives us and loves us, He also has high expectations of us. We are expected to live, not only for our own good, but also for the good of others. Second, we shall be held accountable; we shall be judged; there are consequences for our behavior.

Which leads me to my three points. A word about judgment, hell, and heaven.

First, judgment. It is clear that we will be judged. Which means that what we do here matters. And it matters a lot. What we do literally has eternal consequences. This means our work, our loves and

relationships, what we do with our spare time, how we make and spend and give and steward our money, what our priorities are, all of these things are the stuff of which we will be judged. The fact that we will be judged reminds us of how valuable are the things that we do in our time here on earth. How blessed we are to be given an opportunity in whatever time we have to do good, to love well, to bring kindness and peace and goodness to others. This is our vocation and task, given to us by God Himself, and how we respond throughout our lives will determine where we spend eternity.

The CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH says this about judgment: "Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ. The New Testament....affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith. The parable of the poor man Lazarus and the words of Christ on the cross to the good thief, as well as other New Testament texts speak of a final destiny of the soul – a destiny which can be different for some and for others." (#1021) "Each person receives their eternal retribution at the very moment of death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven – through a purification or immediately – or immediate and everlasting damnation." (#1022)

Pretty stark, but the truth of our faith.

Second, hell. A man left Chicago for vacation in Key West, Florida. His wife was on a business trip and planned to fly down to meet him the next day. When the man arrived in Florida, he e-mailed his wife to let her know he had arrived, but mistyped her email address. Instead, his message went to the inbox of a woman whose husband had just passed away.

When the grieving widow opened her e-mail, she read the message, screamed and passed out cold. The woman's daughter rushed into the room and found this note on the computer screen, "My darling wife: Just checked in. Everything is prepared for your arrival tomorrow. Looking forward to being with you again. Your loving husband. P.S. It sure is hot down here!"

Hell doesn't get much play in churches these days; we're all into positive and upbeat messages. But it's a reality that we have to deal with. Jesus speaks directly of its reality. The New Testament makes it clear that hell is the experience of loneliness that results from pride, selfishness, and sin. It's not 'ally ally in free' at the end of our lives.

In St. Paul's epistle to the Romans, Paul does not understand God's wrath, the punishment of hell, as consisting in some extrinsic punishment – fire for example. For him it is never a question of God positively punishing persons because they have sinned – laying on punishment, so to speak. Rather the punishment flows naturally and intrinsically from the sin itself. An analogy might be helpful here. If we drink too much alcohol, we get a painful headache. However, this hangover is not something that God or anyone else needs to impose in order to let us know that we have done something wrong. It flows from overdrinking. The punishment comes from the crime, not from some outside judge. It is in this same fashion that the New Testament views hell as a natural consequence of sin. And in this case hell is loneliness, cutting ourselves off from others and retreating inside ourselves with only our own pride and selfishness for companions. Hell is like a hangover in that sense, only infinitely worse. It is not some extrinsic punishment imposed on us by a God who is eager to safeguard His justice and to let us know we have sinned. Rather hell is simply the burning painful thirst of alienation, willed neither by God nor any other outside judge, but results from our own sin, from making ourselves our own God and refusing to move out toward others with openness and love. Sin is a tremendously alienating force at every level of existence. And hell is the consequence of our sin. None of us will be surprised at the end of our lives about whether we are in heaven or hell. It will be a natural evolution

of the way we have lived our lives here on earth. (adapted from Rolheiser, THE RESTLESS HEART: FINDING OUR SPIRITUAL HOME, p. 94-95) As C.S. Lewis puts it “All that are in hell, choose it.”

Third and finally, heaven. Mrs. Quincy, the religion teacher, spent some time with a group of first-graders explaining to them that they should be good so they would go to heaven and spend the rest of eternity with God. At the end of the lesson, Mrs. Quincy asked, “Now, where do you want to go?” In unison, the children shouted, “Heaven!” “And what must you be to get to heaven?” she cheered. “DEAD!” came the loud, unanimous answer.

Our belief in heaven reminds us that this is not the final stop. As good as this world is, heaven’s better. MUCH better. And this world is only temporary. Heaven is forever.

Phillip Yancey reminds us that historically, every age before the modern one assumed an afterlife, disagreeing only on the particulars of how best to prepare for it. Egyptians filled their burial chambers with treasures and equipment for the dead to use. Christian saints are remembered on the day of their death, the day their life in paradise begins. Victor Hugo described himself as “the tadpole of an archangel.” But nowadays, laments Yancey, we get much advice on becoming the best possible tadpoles, but little on how to prepare for metamorphosis – our grand becoming of a whole new creation in Christ. Sadly much of Christianity has become merely a brand of spiritual self-help, designed to turn us into healthy, wealthy tadpoles. But that’s not our destiny – we’re supposed to become full-grown frogs – I mean saints!

Whatever! The point is that our destiny is not dust. Our final destination is pure paradise. Knowing that Christ has gone to prepare a place for us in the Father’s house (Jn 14:2), we need not anguish over the ultimate significance of our existence. We are given value not by our earthly earnings or accomplishments, but by the love of the God who has created us and wants us to spend eternity with Him.

Heaven is not so much a realm or a place as it is a relationship; not so much a kingdom as it is a kinship. Eternal life, says Jesus, is a life in which disciples will “Know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” It is an existence in which each of us deeply and intimately knows the God who has created us in His own image, and the Christ who has come to save us from our sins. The path to paradise is a personal connection, one we call faith.

While we don’t know what heaven looks like, we know what it feels like: an intimate, loving and eternal relationship with the living God. Jesus reminds us that we “do not belong to the world,” just as He Himself did not belong to the world. Instead, each of us belongs to God, and our true citizenship is nothing less than pure paradise.

We are God’s! We belong to Him. When we are tempted to put our faith in a pile of ragged, wrinkled and dirty dollars, we are God’s. When we are choking on the frustrations of life or a dead-end job, we are God’s. When we are fooled by the illusions of a culture that attaches ultimate significance to youth, power, money and beauty, we are God’s. When we have messed up our lives terribly, we are God’s.

True happiness is going to be found only in a relationship with God. Complete contentment is going to be ours only in the place called paradise. Instead of playing the tadpole games of this world, we should be getting ready for metamorphosis.

The change is coming, but until that time, Jesus calls us to spend time with Him, each day in prayer, getting to know Him here – who is the object of our heart’s truest desire. We are in this world, but not of this

world. As Christ's disciples, we are other-worldly. We're paradise people. And heaven is all about love. (adapted from HOMILETICS, May-June 2002, p. 17-18)

In February 2002, Fr. Godfrey Diekman, a Benedictine monk of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, and a pioneer in the American liturgical movement, died at the age of 93. He had served at the Second Vatican Council as an expert on Catholic worship. He was much loved by all who came to know him. A friend who spent several months at St. John's in 1999 recalled that during her visits all Godfrey ever wanted to talk about while she was there was the afterlife. Indeed, in the obituary published by the abbey, Abbot John Klassen wrote: "Godfrey envisioned heaven as experiencing God with the ecstasy of honeymoon love. "Heaven," he said, "is eternal, supreme life and love – not just eternal rest." (CHURCH, Spring 2003, p. 13-14) Now that's an eternity – and a heaven I want to have. May it be so for you and for me. Let the Church say Amen.