

8.23.20 L21P11 Gates of Hell will Not Prevail

- It seemed fitting, so I got out and wore my “Man of La Mancha” tee shirt when I was writing this sermon
 - You see some years ago, Mary and I were in New York City and we were able to go to the discount ticket booth in Times Square and buy cheap tickets to the Broadway revival of the musical Man of La Mancha
 - This old musical from the 60s features Don Quixote, an often-delusional character who charges and tilts at windmills because he thinks that they are evil giants
 - But the most famous piece of music from this Broadway show has to be “The Impossible Dream” which has been sung by everyone from Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley, to Luther Vandross and Aretha Franklin
 - And there is one phrase in that song that I want to lift up for us today: “To be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause.”
- To be willing to march into hell – that’s really what Jesus is saying in today’s gospel reading
 - Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, and they guessed a whole bunch of famous prophets come back from the dead – godly prophets like Elijah or Jeremiah, or even John the Baptist. [Matthew 16:13-14]
 - But Peter... Peter blurted out the truth, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” [16:16]
 - Then in this powerful and climactic scene Jesus responded, “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”
 - The rock is faith, and the gates of Hades, or as we might say, the gates of Hell will not prevail or win against this faith
 - Now when we hear this story, somewhere we picked up the idea that the gates of hell would attack the church.
 - But gates don’t attack
 - Gates stand still
 - Gates are strong doors in a wall or a fortress that open or shut to keep people in, or to keep people out

- So if gates don't attack anything including the church, what does it mean that the gates of Hades, the gates of Hell will not prevail?
- It means that when the church of Jesus Christ, armed not with a sword or a lance like Don Quixote, but rather when the church armed with the liberating gospel of God attacks the gates of Hell – those gates of Hell will not prevail, those gates of Hell will not stand fast, those gates of Hell will not be strong enough to repel and withstand the Good News of Jesus Christ
- And the Good News of Jesus Christ is that Hell and sin no longer imprisons either the living or the dead – Christ has died, death and the chains of sin no longer have power over him, and the crucified and risen Christ has shared that victory, the crucified and risen Christ has shared that liberation, the crucified and risen Christ has shared that freedom of forgiveness and life that sets humanity free from captivity within hell's walls, and the gates that imprisoned people in the grasp of sin and death fall off their hinges in the face of the Good News of the death and resurrection of Christ
- Let me give you an image right now, that in a very small yet significant way, points to the smashing of the gates of Hell, by the liberating Good News of Christ crucified and raised
 - Once upon a time there was a Lutheran Church in Berlin, German
 - It was brick, and big enough to seat over 1000 worshipers
 - But in 1961 the Russians erected the Berlin wall to keep the East Germans from escaping to West Germany, western Europe, or the United States where there was greater freedom and prosperity
 - And this wall that was built was actually TWO WALLS – one wall was on the actual border of East Germany, and the other wall was a few hundred yards back into Eastern Germany.
 - That strip of land between the two walls was the killing zone – the no man's land where East German guards would routinely gun down people who tried to escape from the East to the West

- But caught between these two walls was also this big, brick church building.
- Of course it stood abandoned, because it was in the killing field, and in 1985 it was blown up by the Soviet-controlled East German government so that the guards would have a clearer field of fire, and escapees could not seek cover behind the church abandoned church
- Then in 1989 the Berlin wall fell, the people peacefully revolted and were liberated from Soviet control, and East and West Germany reunited
- The wall was soon gone, and the church building had been gone for several years, but the German Lutheran Church decided to build a small chapel at the site *with the same name as the old church and congregation – ironically it was named the Church of Reconciliation*
- Walls and gates rise and fall in history, but the Good News of Jesus endures
- The gates of Hades, the gates of Hell, had been closed and held humanity captive to sin and death, but not only did Jesus die and rise again breaking their grip on us, but Jesus GAVE that message to us to proclaim and to use to continue to smash down the gates of Hell, sin, and death
- Yet still, human beings in our folly like to build big walls and small gates to keep the “right” people in and the “wrong” people out, but the vision of God’s future is VERY DIFFERENT.
- In the Revelation of John, the last, and often to us the most puzzling book of the Bible, we hear this about the walls and gates of the New Jerusalem – the city of God that in John’s vision has come from heaven down to earth to be the place where the Lamb, the crucified and risen Christ lives and rules over a forgiven and reconciled humanity, and then John describes what he saw in his vision: “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. *Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. [22:22-26]”*