Fr. Frank Schuster

OK, let’s begin with a silly afterlife joke. Three women die in a car accident and arrive at the pearly gates of Heaven. St. Peter greets them and says before they enter, "Whatever you do, don’t step on the ducks!" Well the women thought that this was a very odd thing to say, but when they entered Heaven, they understood why he did! Ducks are EVERYWHERE! The 1st woman was talking to the 2nd and, not paying attention, stepped on a duck. St. Peter appeared at her side with a pair of handcuffs and a hideous looking man. "Now that you have stepped on a duck, you shall be chained to this man for the rest of your days here." A few weeks later, the 2nd woman suffered the same fate. Now the 3rd woman is determined to not step on a duck. Weeks, months even years pass, and she's yet to step on a duck. Eventually, St. Peter appeared at her side with the most beautiful man she'd ever laid eyes on and a pair of handcuffs. St. Peter handcuffs them and walks away without a word. "Whatever have I done to deserve this?" the woman asked. The man shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't know about you, but I stepped on a duck."

My friends, no one ever wants to talk about hell. It is not often that a priest talks about hell. For a homilist, it is like stepping on a duck. No one wants to hear about hell. It seems distasteful. But then, Gospel readings like we have today come along and we have to deal with the topic. And it is clear from our Lord that we need think about it and that it is very important that we do. The trouble is: there is a growing sentiment in our culture that “no one really goes to hell”. You have heard that right? We start telling ourselves: the God I believe in wouldn’t send me to hell. We tell ourselves I am no saint, but I am a “good” person. Living my life, day by day, so what if I told a lie here or there, so what if I cheated on my taxes last year, so what if I was unfaithful against my spouse, so what if I only make it to church when I feel like it. Who needs confession, God understands. Me and God, we are like this! Life goes on. My friends, when I watch the news and I see people hurting other people, it has been so, so sad lately, it makes me wonder how many people are concerned about their salvation anymore? It makes me wonder. However, when you read the Gospel, it becomes very clear that Jesus is very concerned about our salvation, he even died for our salvation, and he speaks about the need for our salvation often, like in this startling parable we have today: the rich man and Lazarus. So, let’s take a closer look.

There are two really unsettling aspects to Jesus’ parable today here. First off, the rich man is not named in the story. The bible doesn’t give him a name and when the bible doesn’t give a name, this means this character was meant for any of us to identify with, just like John’s woman at the well, the man born blind, etc. Because the rich man is not named, Jesus is therefore talking about us. He wants us to identify with him for a moment. However, a far more unsettling piece about this Gospel reading is when we ask the question, when and how did this rich man sin in this story? Honestly, what was his sin? What did the rich man do other than to live his life with the resources that were his to spend? When he spent his money on clothes, there was a tailor who got paid who then
was able to feed his family. When he spent money on food, there were no doubt servants in the kitchen and merchants in the market place who benefited. Jesus himself spent some considerable time with wealthy people, so much so that he was criticized for it. So, what did this man in the story do to deserve hell?

Who went to CCD when they were kids, they call it faith formation now? Who went to Catholic School at some point in their lives? You may remember that the Church distinguishes between sins of commission and sins of omission. Remember that? The rich man’s sin is that he was so self absorbed that he did not care to even notice poor Lazarus. Lazarus dies desperately desiring to consume the rich man’s rubbish on the dining room floor. When Lazarus died, God noticed. Now, we don’t know for sure what happened between Lazarus’ death and the rich man’s death. But we can assume that God did try to open the rich man’s heart.

The problem with the human heart is; we can become so self absorbed in ourselves that even God cannot get through to us. St. Augustine defined sin as “incurvatus in se”, the curving inward of the soul. That is a good as any definition for sin, the curving inward of the soul. Dante too described sin that way. In his Inferno, at the heart of hell Dante did not discover Milton’s Satan from Paradise Lost, you know the devil who says, “it is better to rule in hell than to serve in heaven.” Quite the contrary, in the heart of hell, Dante finds a sad looking three headed dragon, a perverted likeness of the Trinity, locked in a glacier of ice that is created from his own tears. This devil is so preoccupied with himself that he doesn’t notice Dante and his guide Virgil standing there. Dante notices the devil trying to break free from the ice by his own effort, flapping his wings. This only made things colder. The message is, if sin is the curving inward of the soul, at the heart of hell is a soul locked in the ice created by his or her own tears, forever oblivious to anyone but him or herself. Now, the rich man in our story is located in an inferno of his own. The sum total of his choices in life led him to his eternal no to God that can’t be undone after death. There is a chasm in the afterlife that cannot be crossed.

The point I am trying to make here is God does not damn anyone to hell. God wants all to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth. The problem is God will not force himself on us. Love cannot by definition force love out of another. God will not force salvation on us. We have to accept this gift though our words and deeds. This is why Jesus gave us his sacraments. He gives us sacraments that are celebrated once and then are nurtured throughout our lives, like Baptism, Confirmation, Matrimony and Holy Orders.

Jesus also gave us sacraments to be received time and time again, like the Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Anointing of the Sick when this is appropriate. God also gave us the Beatitudes, Parables like today and the Ten Commandments for the care of our souls. These disciplines and practices open our hearts to a greater awareness of the Lazarus’ in our lives. Saint Teresa of Calcutta, our patroness, is our model here, a woman who saw Christ in every Lazarus she cared for on the streets of Calcutta. Our outreach ministries are doing a wonderful job celebrating her witness, but every group in the parish, indeed every family in the parish is invited to contemplate her example.
Discipleship challenges us to be better stewards of our time, talent, and treasure, whether we are rich or poor, we should not make the mistakes of the so-called “rich man” in the Gospel reading today who succumbed to indifference to the people in the world around him.

The point of our Gospel reading today is, although all of our religious disciplines and practices are important and necessary, we must watch out for sins of omission, sins demonstrating the failure to act, sins that demonstrate that even after all of our necessary pious observances, we miss the whole point of these observances, namely, to facilitate a greater love for God and neighbor, especially the most vulnerable around us. That is what seems to be missing in our world more and more I think. Love for God and love for neighbor is being replaced with indifference for God and indifference for neighbor. We sometimes care more for what is going on in our handheld screens than we do in the beating hearts of the people around us. The nature of free will is that God will not force us to love him and the people around us, we must choose that. We must choose to be loving each and every day; even when we are confronted with an increasingly indifferent world. When we do so, when we choose to be more loving, we recognize that heaven is not that far away from us. Heaven is not that far away if we commit ourselves to building heaven on earth, one relationship at a time, through Christ our Lord. Amen.