

Sermon for September 6, 2020

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Sermon Texts: Romans 13: 8-14 and Matthew 18: 15-20

Sermon Title: *“How hell got to be so big”*

**PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Lord, Scripture is filled with stories and songs that show you bring judgment against those who oppress the poor and the powerless. Your judgment brings peace to the land. Reach our minds, Lord, that we might fulfill your law of love and love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Amen.**

**PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: Holy Spirit come. Come as Holy Fire and burn in us; come as Holy Light and illumine us from within; come as Holy Wind and cleanse us from within; come as Holy Life and dwell in us. Amen.**

I came from a loving family, but we could occasionally have spectacular fights. One lovely summer day in Parry Sound, we were having a fish fry in the back yard. The fish sizzled in the pan on an open fire over the barbeque pit. When it was just beginning to flake, my mother took the fish from the frying pan and put it on a large platter. Sometime during the cooking cycle and the croquet game taking place on the lawn, my elder half-sister got so mad at her younger sister Jackie (the crime has long been forgotten) that she took the platter of delicate white fleshed lake trout and threw it Frisbee style at her. It missed Jackie, thank goodness, but the fish flew all over the yard, to the great delight of the cat, but to the utter dismay of my father who had spent hours on Georgian Bay with downriggers to catch the fish in the first place, my mother who was trying to feed her guests, and of course the guests whose croquet game had been interrupted. Seeing what she had done, my older sister ran up to Jackie, threw her arms around her, and begged for forgiveness. We knew how to fight with energy and passion, but we also knew how to forgive and to continue to love one another even though we were not above losing our tempers from time to time.

Families teach us a lot. If they work well, they are laboratories where we learn tolerance, forgiveness, and compromise. We learn in a healthy family that we can't always have our own way, and sometimes we have to give up what we want in order for others to have what they want. In other cases, when the family isn't functioning so well, we can bully, become passive aggressive, even physically abusive. We often create the illusion that all is well by denying the truth of a situation. We can fall silent and not speak of unpleasantness at all. The same things that happen in individual families also happen in the church family.

Jesus has some interesting thoughts about the church family. First, Jesus makes it clear that we need each other, not just for physical survival but also for spiritual survival. The journey of faith is not something that you do by yourself; it is what you do in the Christian community. Our life in Christ happens when two or three are gathered in his name. This is when Christ promises to be with us. But Jesus knows that it's not any easier for us to get along in the church family than it is in our biological families. It's a myth that people are on their best behavior when they are in the church.

What Jesus proposes for a healthy relationship is not easy to do. Most of us don't like confrontation at all. But listen to what Jesus says: *"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."*

A few unusual things about this text. Some manuscripts don't have "against you." They just say *"If another member of the church sins..."* This reading, I think, gives the body of the church a great deal of power, and also a great deal of responsibility. Here's an example of how this power can be used for good. When women were first allowed to become elders in the Presbyterian church and to serve communion, one member of a large northern Presbyterian church that one of my colleagues served got up during the Holy meal and walked out. Afterwards, the pastor and two elders went to see the parishioner, who didn't immediately change his mind, but he did apologize to the faith community. It was more important to him to be in relationship with his church than it was to make such a statement about his personal beliefs. If members of the church had not gone to this man, he might not have come back. Jesus himself seems to be more interested in keeping the family together than he is in who's right and who's wrong.

A second thing about Jesus' instructions for the church is that it is sandwiched between two parables of forgiveness: the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the unforgiving servant. So I'm thinking that disciplining members of the church is meant to be resolved in forgiveness. And a third thing. It's odd that Jesus says if the offender doesn't listen to the church, then that person should be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Does that mean we shun them? I don't think so. Jesus has called a tax collector to be a disciple, and Jesus has healed the Canaanite woman's daughter. So again Jesus seems to be saying that no one is beyond the net of grace. But it can take a lot of work to cast that net.

Jesus puts a lot of emphasis on the community of faith. This is so, I believe, because holy work is done in the church in us. In lots of ways it's a nuisance to belong to a church family. It would certainly be more convenient if we were just nice people dressed in our very best who came together once a week to sing hymns, recite liturgy, and listen to an inspirational talk. But that's not what God wants. Barbara Brown Taylor writes: *"Our life together is the place where we are comforted, confronted, tested, and redeemed by God through one another. It is the place where we come to know God or to flee from God's presence, depending upon how we come to know or flee from one another."*

In his book *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis paints a picture of hell that bears a striking resemblance to where many families live, including church families. Hell, Lewis says, is like a vast, grey city, which is inhabited only at its edges. Rows and rows of empty cities fill in the middle – empty because everyone who had once lived in them fought with the

neighbors and moved, then fought with the new neighbors, and moved again. After a few cycles of quarrelling and moving, streets were left empty and deserted houses filed rank behind them. This is how hell got so large – empty at the center and inhabited only on the fringes, because everyone in it chose distance instead of confrontation as the solution to argument. What Jesus proposes for a healthy church is not easy, but it's the way we keep hell from getting any bigger. Amen.