

Sermon: Conflict Management

9/6/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

There is a small town in Michigan that proudly embraces its name: “Go to Hell.” Hell, the small Midwestern town where, they happily declare, more people have been told to go than anywhere else on earth, and where they promise you will have a “Hell” of a good time! You can get married in Hell and be mayor of Hell for a day. In Hell, Halloween is a city-wide celebration, much like here in St. Helens, filled with people dressed up as skeletons and demons, not to mention candy and haunted houses. They even have an annual event named Hellfest, an all-hearse car show, which set the Guinness World Record for the Longest Hearse Parade in 2011. Certainly, there are worse places to live than this so-called “Hell on Earth.”

Then there is the other hell. You know, the one often described as being filled with flames and eternal punishment. Now, I must admit that this depiction has some scriptural warrant; for example, Luke’s parable of Lazarus and the rich man. And yet, the vision of hell that has long appealed to me—assuming that any hell other than the one found in Michigan can be considered appealing—is the one that C.S. Lewis describes in his book *The Great Divorce*. In his book, Lewis depicts hell as a great, huge, dark place. In the beginning, he says, hell started out as a small city, but then people began quarrelling. Disagreements soon led to hatred and discontent, compelling everyone to leave their homes and move further and further out. Neighborhoods which had once been bustling soon became empty and barren, and people who once had neighbors eventually lived so far apart that they no longer see anyone else, nor did they want to. All that remained was loneliness and darkness.

For Lewis, hell became this place because the people who have chosen to remain there—yes, he describes staying in hell as a choice rather than a punishment—only care about themselves. They do what they want when they want, no matter whether it is the right thing to do, and when confronted, they refuse to admit their faults and seek forgiveness. Hell is a place void of relationships, a place where people have forgotten how to love and whom they have been called to love. For Lewis, hell is a place that is both out there and in here (point at heart). The reason why I find Lewis’s account of hell so appealing, for lack of a better phrase, is that connects who we are and how we are supposed to live in this life with who we are and how we are supposed to live in the next. In each, we are given the freedom to love God and our neighbor, and in each we are held accountable how we use that freedom.

What we do in this life matters. That is what Jesus was trying to impress upon the disciples just before today’s Gospel lesson. “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble,” he tells them, “cut it off and throw it away. It is better that you do that than be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away as well. Better that than the fires of hell.” What we do in this life matters, it shapes who we are both now and in the future; it forms us into the type of people who choose remain in hell or leave for heaven. For that reason, Jesus declares, we should strive to remove everything that might cause us to sin. But what if we do not realize that something is causing us to sin, or even worse, know but do not care? That is where our Gospel lesson for today picks up.

“Let’s be honest,” Jesus acknowledges, “sin is going to happen, even within the body of Christ. It’s not ideal. It’s not what God wants, but sin is going to happen. There will be times when you witness one of your brothers or sisters steal another person’s parking spot, gossip behind their neighbor’s back, watch the game rather than help their spouse, and take advantage

of someone else for their own gain. Sin is going to happen. It's not a surprise. It's not what God desires. It's also not the end of the world. So here's what I want you to do. Don't try and ignore it. If you do that, like a volcano, it will fester and build up, until it erupts at the wrong time and place. Find the right moment. Don't complain to someone else about it. Instead, go to the person in private and ask if you can talk. If they say yes, speak with love, understanding, and humility. Mention what you heard or saw and why it troubles you. Hopefully, they will acknowledge what they did was wrong and seek to make amends."

"But," we can hear the disciples respond, "what if we fail? What if we approach our brother or sister in just the right way at just the right time and they refuse to listen? What should we do then?" "Then," Jesus goes on to say, "bring in a few others. Approach the person with one or two other people who can act as witnesses. Your goal should not be to gang up on the person, but to impress on them the seriousness of the situation; how much you care about them. Hopefully, you will be able to persuade them. You may also come to realize that it is you who were mistaken all along, and you who stand in need of forgiveness."

"Do these two things first," Jesus tells the disciples, "only then should you bring in the rest of the church. When you do, make sure that you do not stack the deck in your favor. Remember, the point is not to win or humiliate the person, but to persuade them, to convince them that a wrong has occurred and reconciliation is needed. Hopefully, you will succeed. If not, one thing remains: they must be treated as a Gentile or a tax collector. By this I don't mean that you can never speak to or spend time with them again. After all, Matthew, you were once a tax collector, and you all have seen how I treated people like Zacchaeus and the Samaritan woman at the well. No, what I mean is that, when people repeatedly refuse to listen and repent of their sins, we must acknowledge that it reflects the state of their heart. Through their thoughts, their words,

and their deeds, they have chosen to separate themselves from the body of Christ, and we must acknowledge the consequences of that decision.”

As Christians, there will be times when we need to hold one another accountable and speak the hard truth. There will also be times when we are the ones who need to listen and admit that we are wrong. Times are changing. They always have been, making it hard to always tell what is right from what is wrong, to tell who is right from who is wrong. That is why we have been given Scripture and that is why we have been given the church. Near the end of today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus states that, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” At the time, “binding and loosing” was shorthand for interpreting Scripture and applying it to a particular case. When the religious authorities determined that a particular law applied, like the prohibition against murder, the person was bound to it. When they determined that it did not, the person was loosed. As the church, we have been entrusted with determining what “binds” and what “looses.” We have been entrusted with coming together, whether that be just two or three of us, or two or three million, and seeking to understand God’s will.

I must admit, such responsibility is a little terrifying. After all, what if we get it wrong? What if we faithfully try to interpret Scripture and loose what should be bound? To that question, Jesus replies, “Do not fear, I am there among you.” When we come together as the body of Christ, when we seek to faithfully interpret Scripture, Jesus is there among us, helping us along the way. Yes, we will make mistakes, but they will be honest mistakes from which we seek forgiveness. Perhaps, that is why all the discord and division within the church frustrates me so much.

Remember back before the pandemic, when we United Methodists were always talking about whether we would remain united? During those days, which feel like so long ago, there was a lot of talking; talking in private, before one or two others, in front of the church, and before the world. People were constantly telling others that they were mistaken; that they were acting contrary to God's will and needed to seek forgiveness. A lot of people were talking. Very few were listening. Increasingly, what we have seen within the church is not just a growing divide over homosexuality, but a fundamental breakdown in our ability to listen, to show compassion and understanding, and to admit that, although we believe we are correct, we might be wrong. Jesus is not just here among those whom we agree with, helping us discern right from wrong. He is here among each and every one of us who gather in his name.

What we do in this life matters. It shapes who we are as Christians and it shapes who we are as a church. I don't know what the future may hold. Perhaps we will remain united or perhaps we will divide. Whatever the answer, my hope and prayer is that, through it all, we will remember how to love and whom we have been called to love. We will seek to hold each other accountable, not because we want to be proven right, but because we care about each other. And when approached by one of our brothers or sisters, we will honestly listen to what they have to say. Because when we don't, when we do what we want, when we want, no matter the consequences, we're beginning to sound like the people Lewis described in his book. And I don't know about you, but the only hell I want to go to is the one in Michigan. Amen.