

Halting the Spread of Hell

Matthew 18:15-20

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For wherever two or three or gathered... it can be hard to get along.

It was years ago. I was a “green” pastor, brand new to church ministry and full of inexperience. I was also full of myself – thought I knew what was best for a church; thought I knew what they needed to be told; thought I was the one to tell them.

So, basically, I was your typical rookie.

The pastors met to plan worship one week. I no longer remember the passage or theme for the week, but I do remember on insisting on a particular call to worship. It was a poem by Carlo Carretto, entitled *The God Who Comes*.

Against his better judgment, my senior pastor allowed me to use it. I turned it into a responsive reading so that the congregation would recite parts of it back to me. So Sunday morning came, and when it was time for the call to worship, I stood behind the enormous, old pulpit and, without any introduction or explanation, I asked the congregation to join me in our responsive reading.

Me: How baffling you are, oh Church,

Congregation: And yet how I love you!

Me: How you have made me suffer,

Congregation: And yet how much I owe you!

Me: I should like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence.

Congregation: You have given me so much scandal and yet you have made me understand sanctity. I have seen nothing in the world more devoted to obscurity, more compromised, more false,

Me: And I have touched nothing more pure, more generous, more beautiful. How often I have wanted to shut the doors of my soul in your face, and how often I have prayed to die in the safety of your arms.

All: No, I cannot free myself from you, because I am you, although not completely. And where should I go? Amen.

Amen? Well, maybe not so much. I should have set it up better. I should have explained how *I'd* been hurt by the church in the past, but was still committed to it. I should have explained how many of my friends had been excluded – sometimes painfully,

sometimes humiliatingly — because of the color of their skin, because of who they loved, because they had tattoos or a piercing, because they wore shorts to church... I mean how could Jesus love someone when the bottom half of their legs were so exposed like that??

I should have explained how the church had hurt people I loved, but that I believed it could do better, could *be* better. But I didn't.

After worship, one of our kindest, most sincere — and often times most reserved — members came up to me. Her face was red with anger. As gently as she could muster, she said, "I need to talk to you in private. Now, please."

We went to the conference room and, once behind closed doors, she started crying. She asked, "Why did you do that?"

"What did I do?" I asked.

"Why did you put those awful words in my mouth? Why did you desecrate our worship with such ugly words? Why did you ask me to say such hateful things about my church?"

I didn't know what to say, so I just listened.

She went on to share with me how she had been bullied repeatedly throughout her life — at school as a child, in high school, at work, by neighbors, by nearly everyone she encountered... except by *her family* and *her church*. She said, "This church is one of the only places throughout my entire life where I have felt *safe* — and today you asked me to say hateful things about it. How could you?"

Well, I didn't have a good enough response to justify the use of any more oxygen. So, I simply said, "I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

With that, we stood up and hugged each other, and headed out to lunch with our families, both of us breathing a little more freely.

Biblical scholars call it The Rule of Christ, and when it works, it looks a lot like the story I just shared.

One church member harms another, sometimes without even knowing it. The harmed member seeks out the one who did the harming and asks to meet in private. There, the harmed member shares how he or she has been hurt. The one who caused the hurt *listens*, and — if all goes as it ought — at the end of the day, the family is reunited and the relationship is regained.

In the life of Christian discipleship, we have word for it. We call it *reconciliation*. In fact, in II Corinthians, Paul suggests that one of the primary ministries of the Christian

Church ought to be the work of reconciliation. He says, “All this is from God, who *reconciled us* to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of *reconciliation*” (II Cor. 5:18).

It helps if we remember that Paul also used the metaphor of the Church as a body — *one* body with many parts — where each member is incomplete without the other, where the suffering of one is the suffering of all, and where the honor of one leads to the rejoicing of all.

You see, Paul understood that conflict between members not only *affects* a few individuals, but that it *infects* the entire community.

The Christian family is supposed to work differently than what we see in the world. When we fight, we’re supposed to fight a particular way — no cheap shots, no low blows, no whispering in quiet corridors, no passing ugly notes under the table. When someone hurts you, you’re supposed to go directly to the person and explain the harm they’ve caused. And if all goes well, you’ll regain a member of your church family.

But it doesn’t always “go well,” does it?

Sometimes we Christians can act... well... very *un*Christian.

It was from basic observation of this fact that Frederick Nietzsche said, “I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed.” Ouch.

But he’s not entirely wrong. For a group of people who profess to be redeemed, we sure don’t seem too happy or joyful at times. And when we fight, we do tend to fight dirty!

I don’t know about you, but when I am hurt by someone else, my tendency is not to go *to them* but to *avoid them*.

Of course, there are all sorts of strategies we could employ when we feel we’ve been crossed:

We could pretend like nothing has happened, though the wound then tends to fester below the surface, and leak out all over the place — infecting everything and everyone around us.

We could give them the cold shoulder — just pretend they don’t exist. In essence, we shun them; exclude them from our lives completely. But if we do that to everyone who harms us, we will ultimately be walking through life utterly alone — a sad, lonely island unto ourselves.

You could be like me, and avoid them. If you don’t run into them, then you don’t have to acknowledge any discomfort or pain or wrongdoing.

Of course, any and all of these strategies lead to the same end — separation, estrangement, divorce, *alienation* which are the opposite of reconciliation.

In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis paints a haunting picture of hell — because it is so eerily similar to the way we humans often choose to live. Hell is like a vast, gray city, Lewis says, a city inhabited only at its outer edges, with rows and rows of empty houses in the middle — empty because everyone who once lived in them has quarreled with the neighbors and moved, and quarreled with the neighbors and moved again, leaving empty streets full of empty houses behind them.

That, says Lewis, 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 a fight.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus offers us a different strategy. He says that if another Christian, another believer, harms you go directly to them, and in private *confront* them about the hurt they have caused. If that one does not listen, then take one or two more with you and try again. If that one *still* refuses to listen, take the whole church. In other words, Jesus says, you must do every thing in your power to get your brother or sister back.

There are three curious things about The Rule of Christ.

First, Jesus seems to put the burden on the *victim*, on the one who has been harmed, to seek out the one who has done the harming. Do not wait until they realize under their own power that they have hurt you and come to you. Do not let that wound go untended and fester. It is your responsibility as part of this family to go to the one who has hurt you and be honest with them.

Second, Jesus seems much less interested in who is *right* and who is *wrong* than he is in *getting the family back together*. When we were young, my brothers and I would get into a fight on a daily — if not hourly — basis. When we did, my mother would often make us face each other, and make us *both* apologize to one another. She didn't care who had actually committed the wrong — it could have been one of them this time, but it would probably be *me* next time. So she made us *both* apologize and then, whether we wanted to or not, she made us hug — because she was more interested in getting the family back together than she was in who was right or wrong. This seems to be Jesus' priority, too.

And third, if everything fails — if going in private, if bringing along one or two more, even if bringing the whole church fails to bring the brother or sister back into the fold, then Jesus says, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matt. 18:17).

At first blush, it seems to be an extreme measure. Gentiles and tax collectors were not welcome at Jewish tables or in community with Jewish people. So, for most of the Church's history, Jesus' words have been interpreted as instruction to excommunicate

that one; to cut that one out of the life of the community; to exile him or her; to pretend as if that one had never been born.

But does that sound like Jesus?

In the gospels, Jesus often sought out and spent time with Gentiles and tax collectors. In fact, he even made a few of them his disciples. And the religious leaders of his day were outraged that he shared table fellowship with Gentiles, with tax collectors, with prostitutes, with all sort of unsavory characters.

Would the Jesus who was criticized for spending time with Gentiles and tax collectors really tell us to excommunicate others by treating them like “Gentiles and tax collectors?”

Or could he have been saying something different – something more like “never give up on them;” something like “never stop reaching out in love to them;” something like “always yearn for grace to restore what has been broken?”

“All this is from God,” says Paul, “who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (II Cor. 5:18).

Maybe hell isn't a burning lake of fire where non-believers go when they die. Maybe hell is a reality of our own making – a vast, empty city inhabited only on the fringes – because everyone in it chose distance instead of the hard, but *good* work of reconciliation.

So what are you waiting for?

Set the lunch date...

Make the telephone call...

Write the letter... that will halt the spread of hell.

Amen.