

[Readings: Ezekiel 33:7-9; Psalm 95; Romans 13:8-10; Matt. 18:15-20]

In his book *The Great Divorce*, the famous Catholic theologian and writer C. S. Lewis draws a stark picture of Hell. Hell is like a great, vast city, Lewis says, a city inhabited only at its outer edges, with rows and rows of empty houses in the middle. These houses in the middle are empty because everyone who once lived there has quarreled with their neighbors and moved. Then, they quarreled with the new neighbors and moved again, leaving the streets and the houses of their old neighborhoods empty and barren. That, Lewis says, is how Hell has gotten so large. It is empty at its center and inhabited only at the outer edges, because everyone chose distance instead of honest confrontation when it came to dealing with their relationships.

"Look, she's the one who said that about me. Let her come and apologize!" "We may go to the same church, but that doesn't mean I've got to share a pew with that so-and-so!" "It'll be a cold day in July before I accept his apology."

That's all well and good to say, I suppose... if you don't mind living in Hell.

There is much for us to learn related to Our Lord's wisdom about fraternal correction and conflict resolution. Scan through the newspaper or a social media newsfeed. Correction, rather than private, has become a [public spectacle](#).

There is no possibility of conversion and forgiveness. The [public shaming](#) must be public so that it's permanent. It must be public so that it's violent. It must be public so that we (the righteous) can celebrate our own goodness against them. Against those ones "over there."

These corrections are not opportunities for love but intended to invoke blame and shame. When this approach to correction seeps into the Church (as it has in the Twitter and Face Book accounts of clergy and the baptized faithful alike), we do harm to Christ's body. We perpetuate the cycle of sin inaugurated by Adam and Eve. We are no better!

Are we really so willing to give up our relationships with others -- relationships that have come about and been forged by our desire to follow Jesus? Nowhere, and I do mean nowhere, in the New Testament Gospels will you find Jesus saying that the first order of things is always to be right. But He does have a great deal to say about forgiveness, about relationships, about reconciliation, about service and humility and vulnerability.

Paul says something remarkably rather simple today. In Romans, Paul shows off an idea as clear as water: "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another." We owe each other love and nothing less. Where have we heard this before? Jesus summarizes the law and prophets in similar terms. Love God and each other. Whatever else you say about Christianity, it's not rocket science. A Ph.D. in theology won't get us closer to the ideal, and even a child (especially a child!) can show us how it's done.

Keep this in mind when applying today's readings with our daily living: how to deal with those who harm us, offend us or sin against us. Too often we approach this scenario as bringing vengeance on the wrongdoers. Jesus gives us a different approach. First, confront them privately, one on one. Next, bring backup witnesses to the offense. Today, we call this an intervention. If all else fails, then you can take it public. If collective shaming doesn't do the trick, release them and be done with him/her!

The Jesus method of conflict resolution is not about applying pressure to the situation until your opponent confesses that s/he did you wrong. It's based on winning back your brother or sister. Jesus actually uses the rabbinical term "gaining" them -- a term employed in missionary conversion. It's about restoring an intimate relationship, not wringing justice from an enemy by turning up the heat. In all matters of interpersonal conflict, then, we begin with that love Paul says we owe each other. We are motivated by love and concern for the wrongdoer. If the injurer persists, separation is the fitting response to one who fails a relationship. Toxic relationships are not healthy.

Where have you seen hardened hearts? When have you seen hardened hearts softened? What melted them? When has YOUR heart been melted?

"Love does no evil to the neighbor," Paul reminds us. When we seek reconciliation with one who has wronged us, we are bringing to our neighbor the best possible good. Can we seek the best good for someone who has hurt us? Speaking the truth involves a prior commitment to live the truth ourselves. If truth is to be spoken at all costs, then integrity is the price we must pay.

But the intent remains the same. Remember this: How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? Even prostitutes? He ate with them. He conversed with them. He welcomed them. He kept the door open. And so, as Jesus ate with tax collectors and Gentiles and prostitutes, we need to keep the door open to win back the person who injures and offends us. AMEN!