

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

Once upon a time, there was a church where the pastor and the minister of music were not getting along. I underscore that it did not take place here! In fact, the names of the hymns that follow will show that it was a Baptist church!

As time went by, this began to spill over into the worship service. The first week the pastor preached on commitment and how we all should dedicate ourselves to the service of God. The music director led the song, "I Shall Not Be Moved." The second week the pastor preached on tithing and how we all should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The director led the song, "Jesus Paid it All."

The third week the pastor preached on gossiping and how we should all watch our tongues. The music director led the song, "I Love to Tell the Story." With all this going on, the pastor became very disgusted over the situation and the following Sunday told the congregation that he was considering resigning. The musician led the song, "Oh Why Not Tonight?" As it came to pass, the pastor did indeed resign. The next week he informed the church that it was Jesus who led him there and it was Jesus who was taking him away. The music leader led the song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

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 the 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, I suppose... if you don't mind living in hell.

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 relationship, 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 to rights, 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.

But the intent remains the same. Remember this: How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? 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, we need to keep the door stays open to win back the person back who injures and offends us. AMEN!