

“A Way Out”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
14th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper18A) – 6 September 2020
Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

In 1944, French author Jean Paul Sartre penned a play entitled “No Exit.” It can also be translated from the French as “No Way Out.” In the play, three people are trapped in a room together for eternity. They don’t get along very well, and the work is probably best known for a single line: “Hell is other people.”

I disagree with Sartre on this point . . . most days. I think in this time of social-distancing we’ve come to a renewed appreciation of relationships, of simple things like a firm handshake or a hug or the ability to gather as we please safely, simple yet very special things we now may realize we’ve taken for granted. Some people can be hellish to deal with, true enough, but it seems to me, especially in light of current circumstances, is that hell is having no way out. Hell is being trapped by circumstances beyond your control, or being trapped by emotions that take control of your life.

Does anyone here feel trapped by circumstances beyond your control? Dumb question in the middle of a pandemic, I know. But there are plenty of ways that we can feel at the mercy of forces we can’t change. It might be a poisonous work environment where your gifts aren’t cherished or a retirement in which you haven’t found a sense of rhythm or sense of purpose. Maybe you feel trapped in a relationship, or a whole web of relationships, where you can’t really be yourself, because you wonder whether others will accept the real you. Maybe you have taken on noble responsibilities, like taking care of an aging parent or shepherding an adult child

through a rough patch, and you know that you can't control what's happening, and it feels hard to breathe.

Compared to what some people suffer, especially at this time of pandemic, racial strife, and social unrest, dealing with a person you have a problem with may seem like a minor irritant. Or what might have once been a minor irritant may have been magnified by all the uncertainty and anxiety of the times. But wherever you are in life, God always gives a way out, and that way has a name, Jesus, whose love overcomes all enmity, and whose desire for us to be in loving relationship with all led him to sacrifice on the cross for our sakes. He even went to the trouble of giving specific instructions on how to heal and reconcile broken relationships, how to resolve conflict, specifically between two people living in a community of faith centered on him.

Perhaps Jesus put such an emphasis on this process of reconciliation because he could see how someone could feel trapped and hurt by painful or damaging emotions. Maybe Jesus saw as no else could how dangerous it can be to hold resentments or a grudge against another person. I think Jesus understood that such feelings, such unresolved conflicts can bring disaster not just on the people directly involved, but people who are on the periphery, so to speak, but still well inside the blast zone.

You see, resentment is like an acid that eats away at its container, spilling out and poisoning whatever comes into contact with it. Grudges are like uranium, spiritually radioactive. Grudges destroy the fiber of the person who carries it and can harm others, too.

The good news is that Jesus has given us a way out with a simple three step process for reconciliation with people we find difficult: talk to the person one on one; if that doesn't work, invite a few friends to join the conversation; and finally, as a last resort, take it to the congregation.

The first step is talking to the person with love in your heart. As Paul reminds us in his Letter to the Romans, we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Here we hear one of the rare instances where Paul quotes Jesus, who cited love of neighbor as the essential companion to the first and greatest of commandments, to love God. Without that first step, without approaching a person that troubles you with love in your heart, it's hard to see how a damaged relationship can heal. Through prayer, God gives us the courage to take this tough first step faithfully. God will give us a heart full of love, when we ask for it.

If that doesn't work, there's step two. Ask a few friends to join the conversation. Now this sounds a little like ganging up on somebody, and if you and your friends enter the conversation without love in your heart, then that's exactly what it is. But three loving hearts can be better than just one, and it's worth the trouble if that second step leads to reconciliation in a broken relationship. As Jesus promised, where two or three are gathered in his name, he will be present also.

Then, there's step three, bringing it before the whole congregation of the faithful, where healing and wholeness can be pursued. That is a scary idea. We can hardly imagine a couple of people getting up in front of everybody and sharing their dispute, much less asking such a big group of people to help them sort things out. If anything, disagreement among the group about who's in the right could wind up spawning more division, and to my knowledge, it hasn't been tried for a very, very, very long time, except in some very small, tight-knit communities, like the Amish. But before we receive Communion, we frequently pause to confess our sins, both individual and collective, and seek God's forgiveness and the power to forgive. That is a subtle but potentially effective way of bringing difficulties into our family of faith as it gathers in prayer.

Jesus doesn't want any of us to be eaten alive by our fears, our hatred, our grudges and resentments. Jesus doesn't want us to feel trapped by how we feel. Jesus wants us to be whole, abiding in peace with love in our hearts, even when someone hurts us or angers us. Now that doesn't mean that a Christian has to double as a doormat. Speaking truth in a world of lies, speaking truth when it seems easier to suck it up and move on, that is part of what it means to have, as the faithful, the power to bind or to loose. In fact, the path to healing and reconciliation can take us even deeper into the suffering we want relieved. But it is worth following the path of Jesus, wherever it may lead.

He thought it important enough to take the time to show us a way out, when we suffer tension and conflict with another person. The process Jesus recommends may seem a bit passé to us, but consider the disciples. They followed him for years, and out of all the many things Jesus said and did, this is one of the few that they chose to remember and preserve in writing, these simple instructions on how to restore a broken relationship.

The choice each of us has to make is, will we take that first step? Do we really believe that God has given us a way out, the power to bind and loose, a way to break free of circumstances that seem beyond our control? And if so, why would anyone want to stay trapped by emotions that can take control of our life? When Jesus gives us a way out, the faithful response is to honor his sacrifice and follow his wisdom.

To put this process into practice can bring us relief from an aching burden and give us the knowledge that a problem has been addressed, even if not completely resolved. Working through our conflict with other people in the way Jesus recommends helps us to have a healthy heart, instead of a hard one. And that can give us peace enough to sleep at night without worry for the dawn.

Best of all, we don't have to settle for a world that looks like Jean Paul Sartre's "No Exit." Other people don't have to feel like hell to us, because Jesus has given us a way out: not an escape hatch for troubled relationships, but the grace to forgive and be forgiven, to receive and confer blessing and healing, to bind and to loose. Let's take that way out whenever we can. Amen.