

### ***Homily for August 16, 2017***

In his book *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis, the great Christian apologist, 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 – especially those 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.

He makes it sounds like family, doesn't he?

In today's Gospel Jesus addresses this issue in a most practical way as he talks about how we are to engage in fraternal correction. Jesus says, with utter directness and simplicity, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone."

What a world of significance in that little recommendation! It holds off the sinful tendency of running to everyone but the person in question and complaining about him behind his back. This strategy is utterly unproductive and spiritually harmful, for it does nothing to help the person you are criticizing, and it puffs up your already inflated ego.

I know it is exceptionally difficult, but going to the person directly is both productive and spiritually uplifting. It has at least a fighting chance of accomplishing something, and it confirms you in love. But the right thing is, as usual, the hard thing. Notice please that the accuser is encouraged to tell the person in question alone—and no one else. Venting and gossiping are not helpful.

If that is not effective, then Jesus says we are to take the next step, which is to bring along two or three others, who can seek to work with us towards reconciliation. If this is to not avail Jesus says we should tell is to the Church. This means those who are in positions of leadership within the local community, like the pastor or parochial vicar.

Why is Jesus so specific about how we are to work towards reconciliation? Because the Church is by its very constitution to be a foretaste of heaven – which is the opposite of hell. If hell, is in Lewis' depiction, the place of disagreement and separation, heaven is the place of agreement and integration. This is why Jesus famous words about mutual agreement are set in a chapter whose theme is reconciliation.

This is also why Jesus is so extreme in the application of discipline if a person who has committed a grave sin against another will not repent. They are to be treated like a tax collector or gentile, two groups despised by First century Jews. Why the extreme consequence? Unconfessed and unforgiven sin, severs relationships and by extension, infects the body of Christ.

By comparison how healing and restorative it is to admit when we have sinned against another and thereby can be forgiven. To admit our wrong doing is the first step towards healing. As we will learn tomorrow – to be truly willing to forgive is the second step.

Yesterday I spoke harshly to someone close to me. This person did not need to point out my sin to me. I knew I had misspoken. What a grace it was to admit my, sin, ask forgiveness and to have received it.

There was a unity re-established between the two of us – that was restorative and unitive.

Like what Jesus said:

***For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."***

To gather in Jesus' name is to take seriously the importance of addressing serious sin and working towards reconciliation.

Is there any relationship in your life where you are practising the kind of avoidance that is hellish? Is there any relationship in your life where Jesus' directive needs to be applied?

If so, I encourage you to take to heart Jesus' words and act in a way appropriate for one who is a citizen of heaven's kingdom.