

“A Way Out”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18 (A) – 5 September 2011  
Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 18:15-20

In 1944, French author Jean Paul Sartre penned a play entitled “No Exit.” It can also be translated as “No Way Out.” In the play, three people are trapped in a room together for eternity. The work is probably best known for a single line: “Hell is other people.”

I disagree with Sartre on this point. It seems to me that hell is having no way out. Hell is being trapped in circumstances beyond your control, or being trapped by emotions that take control of your life.

The Hebrews in ancient Egypt might have agreed with that definition of hell. They were trapped under the thumb of a vicious Pharaoh, who treated them with terrible cruelty. Petty little things, like not being given straw to make bricks, were a daily frustration for the Hebrew people. For them, the future must have seemed bleak, but God provided them with a way out.

God sent Moses, who demanded in the name of God that Pharaoh “let my people go.” But Pharaoh’s heart was hardened. He resented the Hebrew people, afraid of their large numbers. So he ignored Moses, and God sent a series of ten plagues, the last of which killed the firstborn of every household in Egypt.

The passage from Exodus read earlier chronicles the preparations God instructed the Hebrews to make on the eve of this tenth, final plague. They were to sacrifice a lamb and smear some of its blood on the doorposts of their homes so the plague would pass over them. At dawn, the Hebrew people would receive their freedom and begin their long journey toward the Promised Land. It’s frightful to realize how far God will go to give people a way out.

Does anyone here feel trapped by circumstances beyond your control? It might be a poisonous work environment where your gifts aren't cherished or a healthy work environment where your gifts don't have an opportunity to flourish. In this economy, where jobs are tight, it can be easy to feel frightened and frustrated.

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.

You see it's not always some geopolitical force that places us in circumstances that feel beyond our control. But God always gives us a way out, just like he did more than twelve centuries after Moses, when God gave his only Son, Jesus, as the sacrificial lamb that would offer people a way out. His blood, shed on the cross, offers a way out, not just for one group of people, but for any person who wants to be free from slavery to sin and enjoy a renewed life in right relationship with God.

The symbolic meal we share in Holy Communion replicates the Last Supper Jesus had with his disciples on the night of his betrayal and arrest. The meal they were sharing was the Passover feast. So there is a grand historical continuity between 1250 B.C., when the original Passover happened, and 30 A.D., when that Passover was transformed into a meal that has represented the sacrificial death of Jesus ever since.

As we prepare to gather around this altar to share that sacred meal, we do so just having heard from the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus gives advice on how to handle personal disputes. Compared to what the Hebrew people suffered under Pharaoh, dealing with a person you have a

problem with may seem like a minor irritant. But Jesus thought it was important enough that he gave specific instructions on how to resolve conflict between two people living in a community of faith.

Perhaps Jesus put such an emphasis on this process of reconciliation because he could see how someone could feel trapped and hurt by their emotions, much as the Hebrew people were trapped and hurt by Pharaoh. Maybe Jesus realized that anybody, not just Pharaoh, can have their heart hardened when they hold resentment or a grudge against another person. I think Jesus understood that this hardness of heart can bring disaster, not in the form of widespread death, but in the effect that unresolved conflict can have on the people involved, and on people not involved, an effect that can lead to spiritual death.

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 dealing with resentment and grudges that we hold against other people, outlined with clarity in the Gospel of Matthew: talk to the person one on one; invite a few friends to join the conversation; and 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 Paul quotes Jesus, who cited love of neighbor as an 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, the light of truth can never pierce the darkness of a damaged relationship. God will

give you the courage to take this tough first step, God will give you a heart full of love, if you 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 do it without love in your heart, then that is 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.

Finally, there's step three, bringing it before a congregation where healing and wholeness can be pursued. This is a scary idea. We can hardly imagine a couple of people getting up in front of the entire congregation and sharing their dispute, much less asking such a big group of people to help them sort things out. To my knowledge, it hasn't been tried for a very, very, very long time. But the prayers of a parish can be summoned discretely and effectively, when the first two steps of the process fail to produce the fruit of peace.

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 live and be whole, abiding in peace with love in our hearts, even when someone hurts us or angers us. That's why he took the time to show us a way out, when we suffer tension and conflict with another person. It may seem a bit passé to us, but consider the disciples. Out of all the many things Jesus said and did, they chose to remember and preserve these simple instructions on how to go about restoring 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, a way to break free of circumstances that seem beyond our control? Does anyone really 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.

It's a test of faith, to put this process into practice, and if we pass that test, we get more than an A+ on a report card. We get relief from a burden, and the knowledge that a problem has been addressed, if not completely solved. 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. Let's take it. Amen.