

Pentecost 13, Proper 18
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

September 7, 2014
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Conflict Resolution—Jesus Style

“God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked.” This is a powerful statement. It means that God is not vindictive. So very often we talk about God as vindictive. For instance, the United Nations Health Agency has predicted that the world's worst Ebola outbreak in west Africa could infect 20,000. Some or most of them will die. We can look at any one of them and see families, friends, neighbors and loved ones bereft of fathers, mothers, daughters, and sons. We are tempted to say, “Nobody did anything wrong that this should happen, so it must just be God's will.” What kind of God would arbitrarily choose the death of good people? No, God has no pleasure in the death of the good. Blaming God for our pain is to show ourselves to be capricious, and to not understand the heart of God.

For some of them we can say, “They were bad people. They got infected as judgment from God for their sins. It satisfies the justice of God.” But that is to say that God ordains the death of the wicked. But God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Making God a scapegoat for our anger does not do justice to the heart of God. It is to imagine that God's love is like ours—conditioned and limited. No, God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

But what does that mean for us here in Silver City today? Our son, Leni, hated to go to sleep. Playing was what life was all about. Sleeping was time lost from playing, so sleep ran counter to the purpose of life. It was to be resisted at all costs, and minimized as a necessary evil. When it came to bed-time, we usually had a tug-of-war on our hands. Leni had a zillion excuses. He had a trillion delays and procrastinations. And when they didn't ultimately work in staving off the inevitable, he would misbehave. He would cry, he would pout, or he would needle his brothers into crying. You name it, he would do it.

Now, my typical father's heart would get very impatient with his misbehavior. Usually I wanted to put him in a corner and ignore him until he straightened up. But my loving and incredibly wise wife, mother of this precious boy, had insight I did not have. She understood what was really driving the boy. She understood that what he really needed was to slow down. He was so tired anyway by this time that if you just managed to slow him down he often fell asleep in the midst of his play. If one disciplined him it worked in exactly the opposite direction. She would sit him down and read a story to him. He would resist at first, but then having his mother's attention felt so good that he would acquiesce. Soon he would be nodding in her lap. 8 or 9 lullabies later we would lay him

gently in his bed, and tiptoe out of the room

She understood something hugely important. All he wanted was to have fun, which is good for children. Acting up is a misdirected desire for the good. A parent's response to acting up is critical. It must be loving, and it must also be wise.

When I read, "God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked," this is the image I get. Just like Leni's pursuit of fun was good but his fighting of sleep was not, our wickedness is the distortion of something good. Drunkenness is the distortion of enjoyment. Laziness is the distortion of rest. Thievery is the distortion of industry. Murder is the distortion of community. Lust is the distortion of desire. Buried under every sin is a good desire. What is wrong is the distortion, not the essence, for evil is always the distortion of the good. Amazingly, then, our wickedness, whatever it is, has something godly at its core. There is something good to begin with that evil is corrupting. Like the image of God in us, it is often marred, scarred, buried and obscured, but it is there nonetheless. If we pursue goodness and go overboard, it is goodness we initially pursued, and it is goodness that we ultimately desire.

God abhors the distortion, but death of the person for the sake of the distortion is to deny the goodness at the core. "God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that they repent, turn, and live." That is the rest of that verse from our Old Testament reading.

Like my wife, God sees and loves the essential good. God will never set us in the corner and ignore us. Oh, we may get sidelined, but God will always have an eye on us, waiting for us to turn toward him. At that moment there is always grace. And God will never put us through something as payment for our misdeeds. Though pain and suffering come in life, the source of pain is never in the heart of God. It is always a result of the fallenness, the brokenness of creation. Pain has the power to point us back to God, to pick us up, put on the divine lap, and read us a story, to give us what we need instead of what we demand. God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

And neither should we. In Philippians 4:2 the apostle Paul writes: "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." A country preacher said one time, "Well of course they had trouble, one was 'Odious,' and the other was 'So-Touchy!'" In the Gospel lesson today Jesus' words address conflicts in the church. Jesus talks us through a 1st-century conflict resolution model, and then he says, "Whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven." He is saying that our relationships have eternal consequences. They must be pretty important.

And then he points out for us just how powerful harmony is. Jesus himself is the unseen third presence when we are in harmony with one another. Together, because we are in harmony, we reflect the heart of God, Jesus, the second person in the Community of Heaven, sharer of the perfect harmony of the Trinity, catches us up in our relationships of agreement into that divine dance—and we ask according to God's will. Harmony is not just nice, it's divine. It reflects the harmony of the Trinity itself, the Heart behind all of creation as it should be.

Conflict management in the Church, then, is of eternal consequence because by it we share in the life of the Trinity. We reflect in this world and Kingdom of heaven that the world knows nothing about.

And so, it is very important to treat one another with loving wisdom. Our relationships, whether in the church or beyond it, are always vulnerable to pain. Intimacy means vulnerability. To love someone is to open oneself up to the possibility of being hurt. We are fallen human beings, just as capable of hurting one another as anyone else. But as loving mothers to one another's souls, let us look past the pain that we cause one another, and look to the truth of another's life. What is their context? What are their concerns? What are their joys and sorrows? The intimacy that makes us vulnerable to one another also holds the key to harmony. As we set aside our own pain for a moment, and reach out and sing lullabies to one another in their pain, the Kingdom comes among us.

Hold one another as precious children of God, look to the real pain driving the hurt. Beneath it is a divine desire. Feed the desire, and forgive the distortion.