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Other People

Texts: Acts 9:1-20; Rev. 5:11-14; John 21: 1-9

In Jean-Paul Sartre's play, *No Exit*, we are given an image of hell that is uncommon, but one that strikes right to the heart of the matter, perhaps better than any other modern portrayal, or even any ancient one. In the play, three characters, all of whom have recently died, are brought together in a rather nicely furnished room. All, when they first enter and see their surroundings are somewhat astonished at the accommodations and ask where the instruments of torture are hidden. But there are no weapons of destruction, no instruments of torture, no whips, no fires, no tongs. They soon realize, though, as they begin to converse amongst themselves, a conversation that will last into eternity without sleep or any other kind of respite, that there is no need for instruments of torture. Instead, because they quickly realize that they detest each other and that they are stuck with each other forever that real hell is something other than physical torture. "Hell", as one of the characters puts it and all of them realize, "is other people."

Ever since I first read this play Sartre's image of hell has stuck with me, for it made me realize as I looked around at people I dislike that heaven itself could be hell if I had to occupy it forever sitting next to one of those people. It is indeed a sobering thought in this regard to think that God loves us enough to place us close to his breast for eternity but that he also loves others just as much, no matter what our particular relations with them might be. It is chilling to think that we are offered the fulfillment of our deepest desires but that we may have made ourselves into people who are absolutely incapable of enjoying the very thing that we wanted most. And what is still more frightening is that even when we think of things in this way, that we still don't

try very hard to get ourselves prepared for happiness, say, by forgiving others and being reconciled to them, or trying to see things from their point of view. Rather, I suspect we try to avoid the issue by consigning others to a place of physical torture and great darkness and then populating our dreams of heaven only with people that we happen to like.

To put it that way, of course, sounds hardly Christian and few would admit to doing this consciously, although in private moments But we should not be too hard on ourselves for we are hardly the first ones in the church who have had this problem. Despite the image that we often carry around of the ancient church as a place where all was done in peace, harmony and love, that actually was not the case. There actually were arguments and not everybody did like each other.

One of the prime examples of where this was the case is that of the relation between two of the most important leaders of the early church, Peter and Paul. Although subsequent centuries have seen the erection of churches dedicated to both of them, and their statues have been put next to each other, those statues are probably physically closer to each other than either of the two living men concerned would have wanted to get during their lifetimes. Although we have no words of Peter himself on the subject, Paul in his letter to the Galatians tells us a bit about the problem. He notes that he and Peter had agreed to split the mission field with Peter going to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles. Peter had also agreed in principle with Paul's contention that the Jewish ceremonial and kosher law was in no way binding on the Gentiles who were entering the church. Nevertheless, Paul claims, Peter had a habit of truckling to Jewish prejudices and of pandering to his Jewish base whenever it was in his interest to do so. So if there weren't any Jewish brethren around, Paul claims, Peter would in fact eat with Gentiles; however, if anybody from his side was watching, well, then Peter wouldn't eat with Gentiles. Paul says he finally

confronted Peter and accused him of hypocrisy point-blank. Paul doesn't give Peter's reaction but given Peter's well-known impulsive nature we can easily guess that he didn't take kindly to the accusation.

It, though, is not particularly surprising that the two of them would not have gotten along very well. Two people couldn't have been more different than they were. Peter was the first of the disciples called by Jesus and he was impulsive, little inclined to change his mind or his loyalties, and he was also uneducated, a mere fisherman. Every step he took on his spiritual way seemed slow and painful, not because he wasn't quick but because after being quick it took awhile for its full implication to dawn on him. There always seemed to be a struggle with him. The first to confess that Jesus is Lord, he shortly afterwards earned a sharp rebuke for trying to talk Jesus out of taking the road that would lead to his passion and death. Although he had loyally and impetuously promised that he would always stand by Jesus, within hours he denied him three times, and had to face the embarrassing chiding that Jesus later gave him when he asked Peter three times if he loved him. Paul, on the other hand, was a much different sort of fellow. In the midst of his rabid persecution of the church he was knocked off his horse and after that astounding conversion he never seemed to doubt. With grace and his well-trained intellect he quickly grasped the heart of the Christian faith, and did not hesitate to let his opinions be known. In fact, from his own time to that of Augustine to that of the Reformation it has been Paul's theology more than any other that we have relied on in order to interpret the meaning of the gospel.

Perhaps one of the best ways of understanding the conflicts of their relationship is to see that relationship as a sort of living example of the parable of the prodigal son. Paul, on the one hand, was the prodigal; brash, rash and bright. A man with new ideas he took them first in a bad

and fruitless direction. Then suddenly in a moment of insight he saw how wrong his life had been, and so he returned to the welcoming arms of the father to serve that father with renewed dedication. And, we might add, he did so with all the sophistication and insight into the human heart that prodigality inevitably brings. Peter, on the other hand, was the elder brother who had stayed at home, plodding away.

It is small wonder that they would resent each other. Peter could not have helped but to resent in Paul all this brightness welcomed, this bad but brilliant boy returned home, who in his brightness clearly overshadowed in a flash all of Peter's own long and hard work. Peter's own faithfulness had given him a prominent place in the household; now he was suddenly second best. Paul, for his part, could not have helped but recognize very well Peter's problem and also Peter's unwilling slow changes, his constant attempt to stay a "good boy," always faithful, always slow, dull and uninnovative, always wanting to be wanted.

Historically we have no way of knowing whether these two great apostles ever worked out the problems that existed between them or not. We have no way of knowing if they ever met again after Paul called Peter a hypocrite. Probably not. What we do know, however, is that both of them died for their faith under the cruel emperor Nero. On the basis of that we have always assumed that both of them are among the ten thousand times thousand that are gathered around the throne of the lamb in heaven. We may assume that they did work it out and that they do not find it bad news instead of good that both of them are gathered around that throne, maybe even standing next to each other.

Now, perhaps in the ending of the story that we do know and what we assume from it there is a clue as to how there might be a solution to the problem of "hell is other people." For what the two of them could not find to like in each other personally was in the end overcome in

their common dedication to something and to someone that was far greater than either of them or their different personalities. By transcending their focus on themselves and their personal likes and dislikes, by focusing on the transcendent good that was ultimate to both of them, they found common ground and a common good. And that is what is needed.

As strange as it may sound, there is probably nothing wrong in having enemies. It is probably inevitable that there will always be people that we dislike, for prodigals and eldest sons are not likely ever to see things completely from the other's point of view. Their whole lives are dedicated to not doing that. Moreover, as one philosopher observed, when Jesus told us to love our enemies he was obviously assuming that we actually would have enemies. He certainly knew that the world that had hated and rejected him would do the same to his disciples. So he never suggested that we shouldn't have enemies.

So what is the deal with enemies? What makes other people hell? I think that what goes wrong and makes other people hell is when, strange as it may sound, we assume that they should be our friends. That is to say, it is when we assume that others should have our particular, local interests at heart to the same degree that we do, when we think that they should be like us. Then other people become hellish, for, of course, they rarely do have the same particular interests. They have their own particular interests and, of course, everybody resents being imposed upon while at the same time they impose.

However, other people need not be hell, and will not be when neither side is ultimately concerned most about his own personal interests or about herself but is concerned about something bigger than either of them that peace and harmony and even love can prevail between enemies.

It is this that makes the difference in the situation between the three people stuck together

in Sartre's play, the three that found each other hell, and two people such as Peter and Paul. None of those three are ever able to get beyond their own wishes and desires. Each, in fact, believes him or herself in hell because of the idiots he or she has to put up with. The result? Each gives into psychic self indulgence, failing to restrain him or herself, and thus the bitter bread of resentment is the eternal food of all of them. That is, of course, precisely what makes their situation hell. For both Peter and Paul, however, it is different. In the end, for neither of them is it ultimately Peter or Paul that matters, not even Peter for Peter nor Paul for Paul. The difference in a nutshell is that the people in Sartre's play are focused on themselves and resent others who have different interests at heart. For each of them it is, as we say, "all about me." They can't get beyond their fixations on self or their resentment of others. Peter and Paul, though, managed to focus on something other than themselves, something, someone who could love both of them, who could embrace all the contradictory aspects of both their personalities – someone who in his love for both of them could form a community, a church. Because therefore they look towards that person that is not themselves, they can live together, even for eternity.

We all need to recognize how enmity is overcome and reconciliation achieved. We all need to know what it takes to be the community of the Risen Christ. Among all of us there are incredible differences. Some of us are prodigals, others are elder sons or daughters. None of us has interests and insights so deep or wide that we can incorporate every other person and their interests into our lives. There just isn't room, and sometimes we therefore feel that we have to defend ourselves to keep ourselves intact. But where we can and do live together peacefully is when, instead of trying to incorporate others in *our* lives, we allow ourselves to be incorporated into a life bigger than any of us, a life that has accepted us despite our flaws. This isn't just toleration, which as George Bernard Shaw once said is the virtue of the man who believes

nothing; it is the love of a God, whose purpose transcends all of us individually but incorporates all of us, that gives us love amongst differences.

That is what makes the church the sort of community it is. What brings us together and what keeps us together is not tolerance, nor niceness nor politeness, but commitment to a single Lord who works everyday to bring us into his own life.

I noted earlier that the depiction of the early church as a place where all was done in peace and harmony and perfect concord is probably a bit of an overstatement. That is, it is an overstatement if one thinks that there were absolutely no personal conflicts, since there were, or that all was sweetness and light. The harmony and concord that the Book of Acts talks about, however, is not an overstatement if one understands that, despite the often frequent personal conflicts, nevertheless they were all dedicated to a common cause, a common Lord who continually drew them together and made them brothers and sisters in his life, who as the vine made them branches. For these people, neither heaven nor hell was simply a place nor a matter of afterlife where all their present problems would be cleared up, but where they never had to change. It was not a matter of personal self-centered fulfillment. Despite the differences, they could live together because of a common Lord, because of a common destiny. It was in that way that they could live in hope with each other, even when they didn't always agree. And to the degree that they lived that way, they also demonstrated even here and now the words of Jesus when he told them that the kingdom of heaven was already present among them.

The South American novelist Jorge Luis Borges once wrote a story that suggested that the Fall of Adam and Eve was not really a matter of a physical expulsion from the Garden but their failure to realize that they were in paradise; they became blind to where they were. Thus he claimed that redemption, on the other hand, is simply the restoration of paradise to our

perception. Perhaps the one thing that keeps us from recognizing that the kingdom of God is indeed among us, that Christ is indeed Risen, is that we concentrate too much on ourselves and thus end up making each other the demons of our own little private hells. We are focused on what we want, and not what God wants, and other people are continually getting in the way of what we want. To recognize the kingdom, however, to recognize it as present even now, is to grasp the common purpose and love that binds all of us together despite our differences, the purpose that chose us, all of us, from the very beginning.

Let us now then claim that common purpose and see in our common work the fulfillment of all of us. And let us therefore set ourselves to doing this common work. In doing so, in serving others we might just learn what we have in common with them and what we are as a community, as a church, even the church of the Risen Christ.