



*And the Devil Laughs*

*Matthew 18:15-20*

15th Sunday after Pentecost • September 10th, 2017

First Federated Church, Peoria, Illinois

The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel

A few weeks ago one of our college students asked me if I would be willing to read C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* with him. Well, that was music to my ears because I love *The Screwtape Letters*! I've led multiple adult studies on the book, including a couple here at First Federated Church. I love Lewis's wit and insight into the nature of sin and how we can easily think that we are being all pious and religious and be neither!

In case you are not familiar with the book, it was written originally as a series of radio talks during the bombing of World War Two in London. The book's premise is that you have an older deputy of the devil writing a series of letters to an apprentice. The purpose of the letters is to "coach" the young apprentice in the methods of leading a new Christian into a state that is "outside of grace." Now, dying outside of grace is completely foreign to those of us raised in the Reformed or Calvinist tradition, but the subtlety of sin and our own well-meaning but nevertheless "brokenness" is sheer genius!

In the second letter the apprentice is told to encourage the new convert to join a church—not the Eternal Church Triumphant that exists throughout the ages and is only known to God, but the local church made up of overly pious people and those individuals that the "newbie" tries to avoid in daily life. Ideally you get the newbie to sit near the back of the sanctuary and listen to how the members talk to and about one another. If he is interesting he may even experience a "church fight"! He will quickly sour on this "new faith" and never be tempted again!

As I reflect upon all of the time, energy, money and other resources that Christians put into accentuate on their differences, all the while ignoring both their "commission" to "make disciples" as well as the command to "love one another as Jesus loved us", whether it be at a local or denominational level, I cannot help but to think that I can hear the devil laugh with glee!

There is an old joke in clergy circles that goes something like this. “Do you know what you have whenever two or three Christians get together?” Answer, “First Church and Second Church!” This is true of Presbyterians and Congregationalists and Baptists and “whatever.” Roman Catholics seem to be able to avoid this; they just create new “orders” or denominations within a denomination.

Today’s gospel lesson was written very late in the history of the Early Church. We know this because it contains an anachronism; the word translated in English as “church”. The word “church” is only mentioned three times in the gospels and in all instances in Matthew’s gospel. Matthew wrote at a time of deep division within his fledging community of faith. Followers of Jesus were rapidly being expelled from the faith of their tradition, Judaism, and trying to come to terms with the rapid influx of Gentile Christians. These divisions resulted in deep and nasty conflict.

When couples come to me for premarital guidance I generally give them a “pre-marriage inventory”. One of the questions is simply True or False; Conflict is not healthy in a marriage.” Almost everyone circles “True” but the correct answer is “False”. Whenever there are two or more people there will always be conflict. “Where do you want to go to eat tonight?” “Oh, I don’t care; where do you want to go to eat?” “McDonald’s.” “No, I don’t like McDonalds.” “Then where?” “Oh, I don’t care; you decide...” You know where this is going. That is a form of conflict, minor though it may be.

The major difference is whether the conflict is constructive or destructive. As we all know it is easier to tear a building down than it is to build it. It is my experience that you can demolish a house in a day but to build a house takes weeks or even months. (Personal experience: Add six months to whatever the contractor tells you it will be!)

When I was a minister in Burlington, Iowa I remember driving by a triangular wood frame house on my way to church. No one lived in the house and owner of the property wanted to tear it down because it was in such disrepair. The city, however, wouldn’t let him do it because of its architectural historical value! This went on for months and months, back and forth until finally one day, I passed it when I went to church on a Sunday morning and by the time I returned home, some 3 hours later, it was gone! The owner simply bulldozed it! End of story!

The writer of Matthew, in the face of dissension and conflict applied some of the teaching to Jesus to his situation. He said that we need to speak to the person with whom we disagree one on one. Resolve the matter. If we cannot resolve the matter we need to see a mediator to help us work through the conflict before it escalates. But, if a resolution cannot be found, there comes a time when we simply have to part ways. This does not mean that we do not love or respect each other. It simply means that we cannot be united and that is okay. God is love and perfect love casts out fear. God's love will never let us go no matter what, no matter if we turn our back upon God, God still loves us.

One commentator noted, Matthew's church, or any church is not a voluntary association of like-minded individuals that align their lives with the will of the elite, powerful or majority. Rather a church is true to its calling when it sees itself as a fellowship of people who are committed to taking Jesus seriously and conscious of the fact that Jesus alone is Lord and Head of the Church.

I remember when I pastored in Williamsburg, Iowa the church sat right across the street from the elementary school. One afternoon I was leaving church shortly after school let out for the day. A child was standing on the sidewalk outside of the church, just staring at the building. When he saw me he asked, "Do you own this?" "No," I replied. "Who does?" he asked. I briefly pondered his question before answering. "God," I said. "God owns this building." Well, he walked away with a befuddled look on his face, but accepting of the answer. And it is true. Christ alone is the Head of the Church. We don't own it. We are just stewards.

The writer of Matthew knew that destructive conflict turns the spiritually immature and the spiritually seeking away from the fellowship of Christ's body and provides fodder for community gossip. And let me tell you, the community really gossiped about "those followers of Jesus"! "Did you know that whenever they meet they talk about eating bodies and drinking blood?! They're a bunch of cannibals!"

Those who decide to take Jesus seriously do not always see eye to eye. This is a given because each one of us have had different experiences. But how we wrestle with our differences is of utmost importance. Jim Kim, the teaching minister of a multi-racial, multi-ethnic congregation noted that in Christ we are not free from each other, but that we find freedom in each other.

The will always be tension as we try to balance the church's peace, unity and purity. Peace cannot come in the face of fear. Nor can it be achieved through intimidation. And especially not when people pretend to agree but privately seethe. Unity does not mean uniformity. Rather, it means that we respect and trust that each one of us is doing the very best that they can in trying to serve Jesus Christ above everything else. Purity means that the motive behind all of our decisions is to serve Christ rather than our own self-interest, bias or agenda.

The world is depending upon the Church of Jesus Christ to act as the Body of Christ on earth. The Table from which we will receive the elements of the Lord's Supper draw us together. When, nourished by this sacrament, we fulfill our calling, the devil laughs no more. Amen.