

How Will You Leave It?
First Reading - Proverbs 8:1-14
Second Reading - 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

I am told that my father's class at Cape Central High School was not identified by the stereotypical collection of cliques. Rather, his graduating class basically operated as one single big clique, a rowdy, mischievous band of beer lubricated pranksters. Was it the principal's farm wagon that was mysteriously disassembled, and meticulously reassembled on the roof of a barn? At any rate, for their graduation ceremony, the principal's summation of their time at Central High was, and I quote, "I wish I could say I was sorry to see you go, but I cannot." The principal's fraught relationship with my father's class was such that he was ready to shake the dust off his shoes and move on from it.

Life together is hard, and there are times when the toxic nature of a relationship necessitates walking away from it in order to survive. Yet, sometimes walking away isn't an option, particularly when your calling or your purpose is to hold relationships together in an over-magnetized world that is continually pulling people apart. Poet Mary Karr observed that "A dysfunctional family is any family with more than one person in it." The same could be said of every instance where two or three are gathered. A

congregation may appear all put together, but that is impossible because every congregation is completely and without exception populated by people who are flawed.

Inevitably, tomorrow a number of you will awake amidst ongoing household tensions that make for uneasy silences where words and feelings have collected like debris behind the dam during a flood. You'll go to offices where hushed hallway conversations spread rumors, complaints, and conflict. On the commute home, the voices, baked with cynicism and iced with insult waste the pure sound waves issuing from those pricy Bang and Olufsen car speakers. The shopper in front of you in the grocery line is angrily projecting his bad day on the browbeaten cashier. Life together is hard, and despite thousands of years of practice at it, we actually haven't improved all that much.

George Carlin quipped about going to a real nice family restaurant. Every table had its own argument. In your home, at your workplace, among your friends who is identified as the peacemaker? Whose voice pleads with pain as the volume around her rises and the rhetoric plummets to the vicious and visceral? As a child we had family friends who invited us for

Christmas dinner in their grand early 20th Century home. They had eight children and so there was always an argument brewing toward rage ... always. The mom, so elegant and tasteful and Catholic contained herself amidst the budding chaos as long as she could, but eventually, like the rising of the teapot's whistle, the boiling point was eclipsed and the scream was not going to be held back. "Just for one day, I asked, one Christmas Day with no yelling!" Well, it got quiet then ... for just a little bit.

Life together is hard. Next month many of you will tune in with us to watch the new season of *The Bear*, prying into the lives of that culinary catastrophe of a family where love, hate, brilliance, disaster, rage, and remorse create the roux for a soup you are afraid to taste but can't walk away from. When the mom, Jamie Lee Curtis, enters a scene, I think I'm more terrified than when Michael Myers was chasing her around with a knife back in *Halloween*. She is one troubled character. However, it takes more than willpower or a mom's meltdown for peace to find a home wherever life is experienced together. Processing childhood trauma amidst such incendiary mental illness, the main character, Carmine Berzatto, a brilliant chef, reflects in words that resonate with every child of fury — "I think when I was a kid, anything that would give me any sort of excitement

or amusement or enjoyment, uh, it always got kinda [messed up]. You know, I-I don't think my family meant to ruin it or anything like that, you know. I-I don't think they did it on purpose. But I-I think they just, they try too hard. You know, or they'd make promises that they weren't able to keep ... I have to remind myself that the sky is not falling, that, um, there is no other shoe, which is incredibly difficult because there is always another shoe.”

How much of life is spent laden with the anxiety of waiting for the other shoe to drop? Don't tell me you are all carefree and cool as a Pacific breeze. The pharmacy shelves dispel that notion quickly. How do you manage the web of relationships that so easily tangle, twist, rip, and explode?

I don't think you can read scripture without seeing the apostle Paul as a complicated man perched atop the cliff of volatility, perhaps commanding a good bit of the oxygen wherever he showed up. I have to think serving as Paul's assistant would be an unenviable career path. When we first meet Paul, Luke tells us he is *“ravaging the church, those early Christians, by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, and committing*

them to prison.” And not all that long afterward, Paul is tersely admonishing the Galatians for “*so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ.*” At one moment Paul is singing hymns to the guards imprisoning him, and the next, while in custody, he is boldly condemning the Romans for harassing him when he is supposed to be respected as a Roman citizen. And then there is that whole list of shipwrecks, arrests, floggings, stonings, and attacks from both his enemies and his own people. Paul Inc. was not going to make that list of best companies to work for. He is variously portrayed as combustible, peripatetic, fiery, wordy (scholars joke about his run on sentences), arrogant, argumentative (just ask Barnabas), a compulsive overachiever, and long-winded (One time Paul preached so long, a guy nodded off and fell out a second story window). Paul’s job listing for an assistant wasn’t going attract many clicks.

Have you ever had one of those friends whose brilliance or wisdom profoundly influence you, but whose lifestyle and personality madden and exhaust you? Learning under Paul was life changing. Living with Paul was nerve-fraying. In reading the stories about Paul in Acts, and the writings of Paul in his letters, you find no attempt to mask the reality that life together

is hard. And perhaps, nowhere is this more evident than in Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth.

On the northeast coast of Greece's Peloponnese, people have inhabited the environs of Corinth from as early as 6500 BCE. With its location making it significant for commerce and trade, Corinth's 1st Century population was notably cosmopolitan and diverse. Thus, when Paul first visited the city around 49-50 CE, he encountered a cafeteria of religion. You had all the Greek gods in addition to local deities and foreign cults, and of course, a cult dedicated to the emperor ... never a good idea.

So, imagine starting a church from scratch in a place and among a people where there is no real shared base of knowledge, no context of shared tradition or ritual. When the organ cranked up Amazing Grace, the congregation just sat there confused — *I just don't like all these new songs!* They were more prepared to sing — *Caesar loves the little children of the world.* They didn't have the Gospels to read. There were no children's Bibles from which they could assimilate the stories of Jesus. They couldn't sing *Tell Me the Old, Old Story*, because there was no old story. Paul would be telling them a story brand new to them.

And rituals and traditions? We've been serving the Lord's Supper for 2000 years and we're still anxious about getting through it without any glitches. So, you can just imagine the tensions, the frustrations, the cultural misunderstandings, and the charged emotions involved in forming one community from a box of mismatched legos. When Paul heard a report of the latest attempt at Communion in Corinth, he about lost his lunch, and he was firing off an email before they could even sweep up the breadcrumbs — *“When the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in?”*

Paul had to feel like he was constantly either having to light a fire under them or put out a fire among them. If it wasn't sexual profligacy, it was the latest lawsuit between members, or a misappropriation of the spiritual gifts, or the arrival of self-proclaimed prophets and experts pushing members toward all manner of heresies. Paul had to feel like Dad in the station wagon, with all the Corinthians fussing and fighting in the backseat — *Don't make me come back there.*

The truth is Paul did go back there, and that did not always go so well. In fact, Paul delayed one visit to Corinth because of how difficult the previous visit was — *“So I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit ... For I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain.”*

Life together is hard, and yet life together is essential. It’s corny but true, as Streisand sang, *“People who need people are the luckiest people in the world.”* The challenge of community is the need for those in it to give up their individual visions of what community should be so that all may be open to what Christ calls the community to be. The difficulty of community is that it is never a paint by numbers project. The art of community is inevitably more impressionism than realism, the lines and clarity of it seldom straight and never completely clear; more Monet than Caravaggio. Community is never finished but is always becoming, sometimes messy, sometimes maddening, always trying, regularly surprising, and at its best — forever hopeful. Church ... community ... this ... is difficult, but in and through Christ always worth the effort.

And so, in spite of the difficulties, the headaches, the emotions, the disagreements, and disappointments, Paul will not let Corinth go, because Christ will not let him go.

Thus, as Paul concludes his letter to the Corinthians, the challenges of living together remain; the lure of false prophets, though hopefully weakened, remains; the trust, tenuous, but the work continues — *“Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.”* Given what Paul has experienced with the Corinthians thus far, these phrases are not empty, but are direct and consequential. *Put things in order* — How many different ways do we communicate that message? Straighten up and fly right ... Pull yourself together ... Clean this mess up ... or, perhaps more fittingly - mend, repair.

Conflict is inevitable. Consequences are unavoidable. Yet, reconciliation is the goal. Presbyterians have a Book of Order that includes principles, rules of governance ... and, rules of discipline ... pages to which preachers and elders hope they never have to turn. Wherever humans gather, things break, wounds are inflicted, grievances are justified, rules and boundaries are crossed, and so institutions, including churches have to have

a way to respond to human failing, and we call ours the Rules of Discipline. It is noteworthy that the purposes of this Discipline include — *“To achieve justice and compassion for all participants involved ... To restore the unity of the church by removing the causes of discord and division.* Whether in the family, at the office, within the church, or wherever two or more gather, the hope of reconciliation has to be primary among the purposes of any group if they want to survive or thrive. And thus, to friends and frenemies in Corinth, Paul implores — *“agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.”*

When messes are made, people are mad, something must be done, we have to have a way to deal with it — and for all parties, it is awkward, painful, arduous, stressful, and never more than approximate. Yet, as with Paul and the Corinthians, the messiness of community, the challenging toil of life together is worth it, because as John said, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” Yes, life together is hard, but without it, life is not life at all. So, strive on, Paul concludes, confident that with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, life together is not just possible. Life together is our joy. Amen.