

With God There's Always an Exit

A homily preached by Jennifer A. Hudson at St. Paul's on the Green Episcopal Church, July 12, 2018

Psalm 142: 5-7 and John 11: 38-44

The play *No Exit* written by philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre was a favorite of mine as an undergraduate. The story involves three characters—Joseph, Inès, and Estelle—who find themselves waiting in a mysterious room. It turns out all three are in an afterlife and are being punished for their bad deeds by being locked in this room together for eternity. All three characters manage get on each other's nerves as Inès is attracted to Estelle, Estelle is attracted to Joseph and Joseph is attracted to neither woman. Joseph attempts to escape the room and when the door finally opens, he doesn't leave. Neither do Inès and Estelle. All three continue bothering each other.

The play is the source of Sartre's famous phrase "Hell is other people," a reference to his ideas about the never-ending struggle of being caused to see oneself as an object when in the presence of another person.

While I promise not to deliver a lecture on existentialism, I will say that I've sometimes wondered what a conversation between Jesus and Sartre might sound like. I think Jesus would argue hell is not marked by the presence of other people but by the absence of God. Nonetheless, Jesus would agree with Sartre on a few things: 1) the existence of human free will; 2) that being seen as an object by others is never good, and that 3) internalizing others' views can torment and imprison us.

We often forget is that an exit is always available, that God can deliver us from whatever negativity binds us if we choose to seek God's help in finding freedom and making positive change.

We are reminded of this truth in tonight's Psalm as well as in John's account of the raising of Lazarus. Martha and Mary see no way out of what's happened to their brother: He's dead because Jesus wasn't there to stop it. Yet Jesus calls to Lazarus and, when their brother exits the tomb, Martha and Mary are instructed to "unbind" Lazarus and "let him go." It's a powerful story that reminds us God's presence can make things possible.

To go back to Sartre's play, I think Jesus would argue that because Joseph chooses not to exit the room, he perpetuates his own hell among Inès and Estelle. Joseph chooses to remain an object, even though he exercises agency and free will in doing so.

Think of hell-rooms in which you may feel imprisoned: addictions, negative self-talk or images, bigotry and discrimination, anxieties and fears. Many of these types of hell-rooms are products or byproducts of behaviors and attitudes influenced by external sources (i.e. other people). Sometimes we let them wield so much power over us that it can seem there's no escape.

Tonight's readings remind us that liberation from our hell-rooms is always possible. We are free will agents—subjects rather than objects—and God's life-giving presence makes this possible. What might you do to free yourself from your own personal hell-room or your neighbor from theirs? How might you be Jesus and not Sartre's Joseph?