

## October 11, 2020 Sermon – 1 John 4:7-12, 19-21

As I was reflecting on 2020 this past week, I decided to write an imaginary story for today's Thanksgiving Sunday message. I hope you enjoy it but even more take something away from it that might help you through the rest of 2020 and beyond.

Charles and Charlotte are twins and were born many years ago in a time when life was very difficult for some people. They were given up for adoption shortly after their birth with Charles becoming part of a family in which he was the only child and was treated like a prince. Charlotte became part of a large family in which she would be treated like one of the family, neither receiving special favours nor given extra chores. Neither Charles nor Charlotte ever met one another after being separated at birth until they were both well into their senior years. They both knew they had a sibling but had never tried to find one another.

It happened at an intersection on a busy road when Charles was the passenger in a large SUV driven by his son, Dan, and Charlotte was the passenger in a small car which her daughter, Gail, was driving. Gail's twins, a boy and a girl, were also passengers in the back seat of the car. After the paramedics, fire department and police had arrived at the scene of the accident, the ambulances arrived with their stretchers which were quickly loaded, put into the backs of the ambulances and rushed to the hospital. The evening news carried the results of the accident to the world: "A mother and her two children were killed in a terrible vehicle accident today. Their grandmother, who was a passenger in the vehicle remains in intensive care in the hospital. The driver of the other vehicle and his passenger escaped with minor injuries and were released from hospital. No charges have been laid or names released at this time. The police continue to examine the accident scene and ask any witnesses to contact them."

Two weeks later, Charlotte was well enough to leave the hospital and began her recovery in her small apartment not far from the house her daughter and son-in-law, Jack, had built a home for their family to grow up in. Jack had visited her several times in the hospital but was not doing well himself. The sudden loss of his wife and only two children had left him shaken and distraught. Charlotte went to visit him as soon as she felt well enough to do so and found the house in disarray and Jack looking like he hadn't slept in weeks. Jack couldn't stop thinking about the accident and the driver of the SUV who had now been charged with careless and distracted driving causing death. Apparently he had been on his cell phone and failed to notice the stop sign at the intersection and had blown right through it, striking the much smaller car on the driver's side. This is what had saved Charlotte from joining her daughter and grandchildren in death as she was farthest away from the impact.

A few weeks later, Charlotte received a phone call from the driver's lawyer, explaining that the driver and his father would like to meet with her if that would be okay with her. It was an unusual request and Charlotte was surprised to receive the call but decided to grant the request. While she was still hurting greatly herself and did not want to upset her son-in-law, she also felt a need to meet the man who had accidentally killed her family. They met a few days later at an agreed upon location without anyone else present. After the introductions were finished, Charlotte looked Dan squarely in the eye and asked him if he was sorry for what he had done. Dan squirmed in his chair and his father, Charles, answered instead. He explained that they were both very sorry for what had happened and the deaths that had occurred but Dan wasn't at fault. Charlotte was greatly surprised to hear the last comment and asked more questions of them as to why they felt he wasn't to blame. Charles did most of the talking and as he gestured with his hands, Charlotte noticed something familiar in Charles mannerisms and facial features but thought nothing more about it. Dan and Charles asked Charlotte what she was going to do about the accident. She explained that it was in her son-in-law Jack's hands and she would support him in whatever decisions he made. She asked them why they hadn't asked Jack to be part of the meeting and both men looked at one another before Charles told her that they had tried to contact him, but he had refused to take their phone calls or respond to their lawyer's letters. Charlotte quickly drew the meeting to a close when she heard this and contacted Jack as soon as she could to tell him about the meeting and to apologize to him for not checking with him first.

It took months for the case to come to trial as the lawyers on both sides tried to do what was best for their clients. Charles and Charlotte were both in court every day of the trial, listening carefully to the evidence given. They were not supposed to talk with one another, and Jack's lawyers had been furious when they heard that Dan and Charles had arranged to meet with Charlotte privately. But there was something about Charles that sparked something inside Charlotte that she couldn't put her finger on. It began innocently enough, with the two of them bumping into one another by the coffee machine at the court house. Charles looked like he was wasting away and his face seemed to have aged years since Charlotte had met with him just a few months ago. When she asked him if he was going to be okay, Charles seemed surprised and wary.

Over the next couple of weeks, as the trial dragged on, Dan's lawyers questioned everything about the accident and the police reports and investigation. They continued to claim that Dan wasn't at fault. Charlotte didn't take the stand because she couldn't remember anything about the accident. Somehow, her memory of what had occurred was wiped clean. But as she listened to the various experts, the police, and finally Charles as he took the stand in defence of his son, Charlotte became more and more at peace with what had happened. Oh, she was still hurting greatly and cried herself to sleep more than once, but something else inside her was calling her to

be at peace with what her life now was. It was a life without her daughter and grandchildren but one that still contained her son-in-law, Jack, who might need her support and help now, more than ever.

When Charlotte and Charles bumped into one another once again shortly after Charles testimony, Charlotte noticed that Charles looked even worse than he had just a week or two earlier. He wouldn't look her directly in the eyes when she said hello to him and shuffled his feet back and forth when she asked him how he was holding up. Noticing that he was trembling, Charlotte did something totally unexpected and which caught even her by surprise. Looking up at him, Charlotte opened her arms wide and embraced Charles, giving him as big a hug as she could manage with her rather frail, senior body. Without knowing why, Charles hugged her back and began to sob onto her shoulder, the tears that he had been holding back ever since the accident, rushing out. Charlotte let him cry it out before stepping back and smiling up at him. Then they both went back into the courtroom to continue watching the trial.

Charles phoned Charlotte that night and asked if he could meet with her, just the two of them. Charlotte agreed, sensing that it had taken a great deal of courage for Charles to phone her. Any maybe even more than courage, it was because he was hurting so much and in such great need of comfort. When they met the next day, Charles didn't waste much time in small talk. He came right out with it and asked Charlotte how she was managing to be doing so well with what had happened to her. He told her he could see the peace on her face and when she had hugged him, the father of the man who had taken her only daughter and grandchildren from her, he was at a total loss for understanding. Charles admitted that he was an awful mess and was on medication to help him sleep. If his son went to prison because of this he didn't think he would survive.

Slowly but steadily, over a couple cups of coffee and tea, Charlotte told Charles of her secret to peace. She explained that she had been adopted by a family when she was just a baby, growing up with very loving parents and siblings who were taught to always be thankful in life, no matter what situation they might find themselves in. The great gift she had been given by being adopted into this family was the ability to be someone who always looked for the good in any circumstance and to see through the eyes of love whenever she looked into someone else's eyes. She told Charles that she had been tempted to be very angry with him and his son when they first asked to meet with her, but somehow, grace intervened and allowed her to keep that anger at bay. She explained to Charles, as he looked at her with admiration and wonder, that to seek to blame others for every bad thing that was happening would only lead to a life of judgement and faultfinding that would result in a life of turmoil and unhappiness.

Charles was holding onto his coffee cup with both hands and slowly let go with one hand and reached across the table to rest it on Charlotte's. He told her that he was adopted as a baby also, and went to live with a family that was very successful in the business world. His parents had both doted on him and had given him every material thing he had ever asked for. He had learned from them that if you wanted something in life you had to work hard for it and not hesitate to blame others for their lack of success. They had taught him to judge others whenever he didn't agree with them.

Charlotte rested her other hand on top of that of Charles and gently asked him why he was telling her this.

Charles lowered his head as he told Charlotte that he was very wealthy and had hired the best lawyers for Dan who had promised him they could win this case. Somehow, they told him, they would find a way to lay the blame elsewhere, or at least cast enough doubt into the juror's minds so that they wouldn't be able to convict Dan. Slowly raising his head, he looked her in the eyes and told her he was sorry. Sorry for putting her and Jack through this trial instead of just taking the blame for the accident. Sorry for being such a jerk all his life. Then he told her what was most important to him. He said to her, "Most of all, I want, I need to be at peace with myself, with others, and with the world. I don't have long to live anymore and I don't want to go to my grave feeling like I do now. I need to make things right. At least as right as I can."

Charlotte smiled at Charles with eyes that had shone with love for others all of her life, no matter what the situation was. She said, "If you really want that, stop blaming and judging anyone and start loving and forgiving everyone, including yourself. Become someone who is able to be thankful in every circumstance and who can see the spirit of love that beats within every person. That's the secret to my peace."

Charles leaned back and was silent for a moment or two. Charlotte sat comfortably with the silence, knowing that Charles was mulling something over in his mind. Finally, he leaned forward again and said, "Somehow, I think I should know you. It's as though we're connected in some way that I don't understand."

Charlotte grinned and replied, "We're all connected, Charles. That's the secret to peace and happiness. It doesn't matter as much whether we're related by blood as it does that we're related by a spirit of love for one another. You and I are part of the same family – that of humanity – and when we all treat one another like a family that loves one another, maybe the world will be at peace too."

Charles began to tell Charlotte how much he admired and maybe even envied her when the court was called back into session and he helped her out of her chair and back into the courtroom.

I hope you've enjoyed this imaginary story that I wrote especially for this Thanksgiving service. At first, you may wonder why I've included so much pain and loss in my story so let me explain. The world we live in is both a place of much beauty and love as well as a place of much pain and sadness. Nobody lives in a situation where life is always wonderful. Often, it is in our times of loss and suffering when we are most aware of what we are missing in our lives and how we want things to be better.

In the history of humanity judgemental attitudes have fueled war, violence, starvation, oppression, racism, etc. However, when humanity has been able to set aside the desire to blame and find fault with others, it has led to peace, plenty of food and resources for everyone, an appreciation of our commonalities, and a spirit of cooperation.

At the present time, there is a lot of unrest in the world, as some people attempt to blame others for this pandemic, or oppress others because of the colour of their skin, or consider some of less importance due to their gender, or ignore the well-being of the environment for the short-term pleasures we might get to enjoy, or for some other reason that is tied to not loving everyone as though they are our brothers and sisters, all created in the image of God.

I hope this story I told today will help you to appreciate this Thanksgiving Sunday, even if we can't be with our families as in previous Thanksgivings. To focus on what we don't have and to seek to blame someone else for this will only lead to a lack of peace within us and lessen any joy we might be able to experience. We may get some short-term satisfaction by finding fault with those who have put restrictions in place, claiming that they make no sense, but in the end, if we want lasting peace, we must learn to let go of these judgemental attitudes and give thanks in all circumstances.

I will close with the words from the letter of John: **“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them ... The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”**

