

Reconciliation

Questions of the Congregation Series

I'd Love to Hear a Sermon about: Reconciliation

by

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Matthew 7:1-5

7 “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ²For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, ^[c]not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

When we began to look at the topics that you proposed for our summer sermon series, I felt a kinship with you. I recognized your questions; they are the same ones I have wrestled with again and again. They are questions I return to year after year. I am excited to hear how my colleagues will approach each one and look forward to their insight. When I saw that reconciliation made the cut, I knew that this topic, *reconciliation*, was the one I wanted. It is concept that has grounded me and guided me. As soon as I started, I realized that this might have been a mistake.

When I care about a topic, I tend to build a collection of books and writings, as many resources as I can find. So of course, I turned to that pile when I began working on this sermon. I started digging through the writings that shaped my understanding of reconciliation. They range from the practical to the theoretical to the poetic. I have stacks that describe personal reconciliation, community based programs, national and international accounts. I was flipping through well-worn books on peer mediation and conflict resolution, reports on the efficacy of the Umuganda process in post- genocide Rwanda. I re-read family systems theory. I wept watching videos from the Guatemalan Truth and Reconciliation hearings. I skimmed through books like *Night, Blood Done Sign My Name* and *Cry the Beloved Country*. As I was looking for the right quote, the right illustration to explain what reconciliation is, to explain this ministry, *this God given* ministry; I was distracted by a TV show that was playing as background noise to my reading.

Some of you may have seen the program, but those of you who haven't: *The Repair Shop* is a British program where people bring well loved, but ultimately broken family heirlooms or personal possessions to be repaired. The restoration team, a team of master craftsmen: carpenters, ceramists, watch makers, and even an occasional accordion specialist, take these broken objects and restore them. I was sitting among my books, with the sound turned down, when the show grabbed my attention. There were two members of the team, gently and gingerly examining a sagging, dog chewed piano bench. The woman who had brought the bench to their shop teared up as she told the bench's story. The two men listened to the details that transformed this bench into something precious. They got to work, taking it apart, and lovingly restoring the bench. Item after item, from the sublime to the I-would-never-put-that-in-my-house, they take the broken, wobbly, long cracked, and bent things and slowly returned to them to wholeness.

Reconciliation is many things, but at its heart, it is about restoration; repairing that thing which was broken or destroyed or lost. The reconciliation we're talking about today is a bit harder than restoration because rather than repairing a watch that has been over-oiled, we are seeking to repair those unseen connections between people.

For both Jesus and later for Paul, reconciliation sat in this uncomfortable intersection where our relationship with God and our relationship with one another meet. That is the space where reconciliation lives. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is offering a master class in how to relate to God, how practice your faith, how to seek forgiveness and how to receive mercy. Here, in chapter 7, there is a turn: how should we treat one another? Jesus' answer is deceptively simple: Do not judge, do not pick at another's eye, when there's a log in your own. If we take seriously the message of the gospel: that in Christ our relationship with God is restored. If we take seriously the promise that we can speak to God as a loving parent or that we can trust in God's mercy. *If we are reconciled with God*, then we must also seek to be reconciled with one another. We seek forgiveness and in turn seek to forgive.

Paul takes it to the next level. This isn't just an action, this is a ministry, this is a calling, this is our work, our holy identity handed over from Christ himself. This ministry of reconciliation, of people and relationship restoring, is part of who we are as Christians.

It's not to say that it's easy work. Let's be honest, Paul had plenty of people in his ministry he never reconciled with, but that doesn't let us off the hook. No, reconciliation is work we are called to, work that it is at the heart of our identity as followers of Christ.

What my books tell me, and what the experts will agree upon – as much as experts across many fields will ever agree – is that the process, the steps, in reconciliation are relatively straightforward.

It must begin with truth: acknowledging, naming, unearthing, seeing, laying bare the hurt. More often than not, we have learned a million ways to hide these hurts. We joke about our scars, we build barriers between ourselves and others, we hold secrets, we create a stories that explain away an uncomfortable past, we

dismiss the pain another might feel, and we smugly sit in judgement of another's actions or reactions. Reconciliation begins the hard work of peeling back those defenses and seeing what lies beneath. It is acknowledging that the watch is broken and that it has been. It is taking it apart piece by piece to see which mechanisms are in need of repair. It is recognizing that logs and specks are indeed in our eyes and limiting our vision.

This cannot be done in isolation. Reconciliation requires looking at that truth from our own perspective, but also asking another to share what they see. It means listening, and trying to understand. It means learning. It means listening when someone names a hurt we were unaware of or had tried to forget. It means paying attention when we learn that we have hurt another. It is tugging at old wounds, and so it is a careful process. We are careful with ourselves and with others so that we do not cause more harm.

Once we name and see what harm has been caused, reconciliation is the work of repairing that relationship. Not just peeling off the coat of old paint, but sanding and leveling, and oiling and replacing the missing bits, making sure every part has been found. It is the work of rebuilding trust, of establishing boundaries, of acknowledging our own limitations in the process. It is taking out the specks and the logs. Reconciliation is not some magical spell we cast that makes the past disappear. It is an organic process knitting sinew, bone and vein back into a living organism. It can take time. It can take a lifetime. It can take lifetimes.

Reconciliation ultimately requires that we, ourselves, must change. It's choosing to wear gloves when you handle that brass antique or moving the beloved bowl from the windowsill where it keeps falling off. It is finding a way to avoid branches and woodchips because they keep landing in our eyes. It requires that if we have wronged another, *we cannot just say "I'm sorry."* We must also change our actions so that such injury *cannot be repeated*. It means that once aware of the hurt, *we would actively intervene when we see another about to make the same mistake or add to same injury.*

It doesn't matter if that is between two people, between two nations, within a community. No matter the scale, the process is the same.

Easy peasy huh? I don't think Netflix will be pushing a 30 minute episode about human reconciliation just yet, but I live in hope.

Of course, the work of reconciliation is the work of a lifetime. While the process matters, I don't want us to forget *why* it matters, why our faith demands that we care about this.

As humans: our brains are formed to protect us from pain and from danger. We take in information which is passed to the very heart of our brain – the amygdala—which then takes that data and decides if we should run, fight, freeze, or try to please our way out of a situation. Our bodies physically react in that moment. We react to a memory of a hurt long past, to a story, to a thread of information about another person. Those reactions are immediate and they are not always the response we want. Our human nature is to respond immediately, but our faith asks, our faith demands that we pause for a moment.

Our faith asks us to do something radical in that moment. Our faith asks us to pause and to reconsider what ... sorry that's the wrong word... to reconsider WHO we are reacting to. To refocus from the pain, and the anger, and the hurt, and to see the person on the other side. That's what reconciliation asks of us. Before we jump to a conclusion, we pause, we listen, and look with kindness.

Our faith asks us to take the six seconds to see the big picture. To see the person, the people, not from our human, reactive point of view, not from a place of fear or hurt or anger, but from that place of intersection, from that space where our faith and our lives intersect and meet in Christ. For it was Christ who gave everything so that we could be reconciled with God. It was Christ who risked everything so that we might be right with the almighty.

God doesn't just look at us as redeemed beings, no God looks at the world with that same kindness. God looks on our neighbors, our enemies, and our friends. If God can look at us in such a light, why can't we see in each other in the same way?

That is the why—we no longer see each other from a place of reaction rather we see each other as God sees us, we look at one another from a place of love.

It does not mean that you have to forgive someone. It does not mean *that someone has to forgive you,*

It does not mean that we all have to ‘move past’ or ‘forget’ or dismiss the past.

The why does not negate the hard work of reconciliation; rather it tells us where we begin.

It means I cannot paint you or anyone else as someone other than a child of God.

At the end of the day, Reconciliation is a recognition that speaks to the specks and logs we have in our eyes. These barriers are not just a nuisance... they are hurting us. They are damaging us. They are limiting if not destroying our vision. Reconciliation is the acknowledgment that we not only need to remove the things that are causing harm, but that we need to help each other in that work as well. We need to clear our eyes to start this hard work.

At the end of each episode, the objects still have scratches, a few bite marks remain, sometimes a thin line where crack was. The long hours of painstaking repair work are heard in the sound of a clock’s chimes, seen in the shine of refurbished wood, reflected in a new brass piece. It begins when someone acknowledges that something precious is broken and takes the risk and the time to see it made whole.

So, we have been given this ministry of reconciliation not because we are perfect, not because we won’t react not because we haven’t hurt another, but because God reconciled all things so that we might be made whole. Now it is our work to do the same for all of those around us.