

# What is Reconciliation? The Other

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**Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 and Matthew 5:21-26**

I am a huge fan of March Madness, though this year my bracket looks worse than ever. Because of that, I was trying to conceive of Lent this year as a kind of reverse March Madness, with various understandings of reconciliation as the advancing teams. Rather than losing, though, each new understanding of reconciliation would advance until the finals on Easter morning, with reconciliation as the champion and all of us winning our office pools!

We identified the basic theme of reconciliation at the outset, that God's project, through Jesus, is reconciliation, the healing of division, the repairing of brokenness, making things right. That is the first round game, the final, and everything in between.

Then we began to explore what that looked like, and what it will look like. Last Sunday, we considered internal reconciliation, that Jesus accepts us, wants us to be reconciled with our inner selves, wants us to love our own hearts and spirits, have our own thirst quenched in order for us to be able to love others, and the world.

Each of these forms of reconciliation is important. Each are gifts. Each is difficult. Each means we look deeply at ourselves and do the necessary work for change.

Today's bracket entry is no different. It moves us beyond internal reconciliation and along the path to more global reconciliation. In many ways it may be the most difficult, because it calls for honesty and vulnerability and risk. It invades our everyday living and meddles with our relationships and the rhythms and patterns of our lives.

Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, is in the midst of what is called the Sermon on the Mount. What he is doing is sharing with his followers an alternative vision for how to live life. He begins with what we call now the Beatitudes, which we work so hard to sanitize and beautify that we often miss their immediate impact. The Beatitudes are about how we live life, day-to-day, not in some theoretical

universe but as we move through our own experiences and encounters. Do the right thing. Take mercy. Stick up for what you believe. This is how we are called to live, and Jesus knows that as important as it is, it is equally difficult, and counter-cultural.

He then tells the crowd, and us, that we are called to be salt and light, to provide seasoning and illumination wherever we find ourselves. Again, this is not some theoretical suggestion, but rather has to do with our quotidian lives, our daily encounters and choices and decisions. Live this way and not that way, Jesus says. In our family life, in our friendships, in our work, in our volunteering. Certainly in our faith communities. You can make a difference by how you live, even when it is risky and counter-cultural and prime for rejection.

And then this, a challenging form of reconciliation because it gets to the heart of who we are and how we engage others in the immediacy and intimacy of our relationships. Jesus says that if you are angry with a brother or sister, presumably a member of your faith community, you have a problem. This is about interpersonal relationships, which is why it feels so hard and why it feels so meddling. In our parlance, Jesus says that if you are angry with someone, if you have a grudge or a conflict, put everything on pause – including putting your offering in the offering plate – and work it out. “First be reconciled to your brother or sister,” he says, “and then offer your gift.”

First be reconciled. Imagine that angry situation, that dispute, that conflict. Because we are human, they are inevitable. Someone says a word in anger, or takes an action that the other perceives as diminishing or devaluing. A spouse or partner. A parent or child. A friend. A co-worker. A fellow church member. We can perceive what that looks like because I can believe that we’ve all been in those experiences. Perhaps we are in them now. On the giving end or the receiving end, or both. Perhaps they are minor. But perhaps not.

And we know what happens. One word turns into several words. One act becomes a pattern. A minor conflict becomes major.

I read a story this week about a famous author. The story recounted the author’s childhood, how the parents provided a loving and supportive environment. Then one choice was made, a choice contrary to the parents’ wishes. “Now they are estranged,” the story said. Now they are estranged, and I became momentarily

sad for a person I'd never heard of or met, for a reality of closed-off relationships with little hope for reconciliation.

Now they are estranged. It is not how God intends us to live; it is not why we were created to live. What feels authentic to me in this passage – when perhaps much of the Bible can seem more conceptual or theoretical – is that Jesus knows that we will be in conflict with others, even those near to us, even those we love. We wouldn't need reconciliation otherwise.

This admonition is a call to maturity, to deep self-reflection. It takes courage on both sides to do what Jesus is suggesting. It takes courage to admit wrong, to confess fault. Our egos are not always conditioned to do that. It leaves us vulnerable and open. And it takes courage to receive that admission, to let our defenses down and accept when we've been conditioned to build walls of protection. It takes courage, but I can tell you from my own personal experience and from the experiences of so many, it is worth it.

We are in tender territory at this point. Vulnerability and risk are not always our strong suits, and the potential for things not to go well is high. I am mindful that I am not a psychologist or a counselor. And I am mindful that each situation has its own unique and important circumstances. Reconciling conversations have to be held in their own time and rhythm and cadence. They cannot be forced, or artificial.

And they must be held on common ground and equal terms. One always gives and takes in a relationship, but to give unequally or unfairly for the sake of a supposed harmony is not what Jesus is contemplating, especially in the most intimate of relationships. To submit oneself to a reconciling conversation simply to move on is not true reconciliation. Or to do so on a surface level without exploring the deeper issues is just that, a surface level conversation.

And there are caveats. Sometimes we are in it so deep, or in such a prolonged way, that we will need help, a counselor, a friend, a minister, a mediator. That is fine; it is no sign of weakness.

And sometimes it will not work. We know that. We know there are such things as irreconcilable differences, that our sheer humanity makes restoration and repair unattainable. I cannot speak for Jesus, but I would think he might say that the

effort is worth it, that we cannot control how the other reacts, but we can determine our own words and actions in these efforts.

Jesus offers us an invitation, an archetype for whole and healing human relationships, and it is our task to apply his vision in the individual and unique ways that we live our lives.

It is true that every friendship cannot be healed. It is true that every marriage cannot be restored. It is true that every conflict cannot be resolved. But some can, and are. Each day where they linger is one day harder for them to be healed. And each reconciling conversation that is held is one more opportunity for Jesus' vision to be embraced.

It is not wishful thinking, nor is it an invitation to perpetuate injustice or inequality, or worse. Nor is it ever easy. But every time I suggest to someone else – have you talked to them about it? – or said to myself, you know, I need to apologize, or clear the air, or stop being so prideful or hard-headed, the greater the opportunity for the seed of reconciliation to take root and bloom.

It may seem simple, or trivial, when the world's reconciliation needs are so great. But it is not trivial, or unimportant. It matters because Jesus says it does, and we should take him seriously. And it matters because in order for us to be a force for reconciliation in the church, or the world, which we are called to do, we will be so much more effective at it, so much more faithful, if we are at peace with those closest to us, who know us, and who we know, who love us, and who we love. It will be difficult, and it may not work. But Jesus tells us that it is worth it, and we know that in our hearts to be the gospel truth. Amen.