

Lectionary 23
Proper 18
Pentecost 12
4 September 2011

Ezekiel 33:7-11
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20
Psalm 119:33-40
Year A

I.N.I.

Reconciliation is hard work. Reconciliation is the work of the church. Reconciliation strengthens families, communities, and society alike.

One of the hardest things to do is to confront someone with an aim to gain back their friendship. Coming up with the right words is challenging. “Friend, I think you did something wrong.” “Friend, I’ve been terribly hurt by what you said.” Being careful not to exaggerate or alienate is difficult.

Equally hard is being on the receiving end of the criticism. We are prone to lash back at the other when accused of wrongdoing. We may simply cut off the conversation and be done with the relationship. Or we may seethe while we justify our behavior.

Through the “churchiest” gospel, Matthew, Jesus gives the church exquisite advice for how to manage conflict. Notice Jesus does not say that conflict never happens in church. Notice Jesus does not invite the community of believers to wear false smiles and cover up problems. Instead of speaking about avoiding conflicts, Jesus speaks of holy reconciliation.

We might even call it rules for **fighting faithfully**. Here’s how it works. Rather than go around complaining to others about what someone did, or ganging up on the problem child with a bunch of people, go directly to the source of conflict, one on one. Choose your words, and state your experience. If you are listened to, you have achieved reconciliation!

If one on one doesn’t work, bring one or two others back with you to **fight faithfully** again. Think about how whether one or two will be beneficial. Bringing others along means that you are bringing one or two other personalities and perspectives with you, who can gauge how the process of speaking and listening goes. Those accompanying you may ask you to change your own language, or to clarify your criticism. Those along with you may also encourage the one accused to listen well.

If bringing one or two along doesn’t work, you must try one more time. This time and only this time does it become an issue for the larger community, particularly as the rift ripples out into the experience of the community. The **community must then work the work of reconciliation, or practice the rules of fighting faithfully** once more.

If that doesn't work, and only then, the person may be considered, as they say, *excommunicated*, that is, outside of the community. Jesus' words sound harsh when he says, "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." But follow Jesus' own actions. How did he treat Gentiles and tax collectors, except as those on the outside who needed constantly to be invited in? Likewise, the last resort of excommunication is not to permanently cast out, but to do so always with a mind to welcome back as reconciliation happens.

Martin Luther took seriously this work of the church. In his early writings, he considered that the ritual of Penance might rightly be considered a Sacrament because of the power of the spoken word and the experience of grace through it. Most of us don't think of penance as a particularly Lutheran practice, but even private confession has been retained as a means of reconciliation in Lutheran doctrine. Luther's concern was that enumerating sins is not necessary for forgiveness. The main thing is to have a contrite heart. But Luther knew the human need to release sorrow, so he provided an order that I myself have still used in pastoral counseling when the need to hear forgiveness is so strong. You may have heard similar words in a corporate or public confession, when the pastor says, "In the stead and by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins." Luther says that when a pastor says that it's as if Christ himself has spoken. I need to hear forgiveness from Christ, don't you?

Martin Luther took this sense of reconciliation even further in what he called the Ministry of Mutual Conversation and Consolation. Here, instead of between pastor and parishioner, reconciliation works through the meaningful conversation between sisters and brothers in Christ. You may have experienced a sense of relief from your burdens when sharing them with another. In the give and take of caring conversation, Christ himself is there. As a holy space is made for two or three to discern how to find a way, a new way, community is strengthened.

Christ's work of reconciliation is demonstrated in the way of the cross, as Jesus forgave those who ridiculed him. Christ's work of reconciliation is demonstrated in the way of the cross, as Jesus extended paradise to the thief who repented. Christ's work of reconciliation is demonstrated in the way of the cross, as we apply the hard work of reconciliation, **faithful fighting** as an alternative to the ways of force rampant in our world and the misguided adage, *might makes right*.

As we consider how we might take on Paul's advice to love in his letter to the Romans, which is an active love, not as one teacher of the church calls a "sloppy agape," let us on this Labor Day weekend remember those who work who seek meaningful wages and pray that speaking and listening guide labor negotiations. As wars and violence and destitution continue to plague the Middle East and Africa, let us remember those who serve on battlefields who with us wait for a peaceable end to conflicts over land, terror, and tribal disputes. Let us remember those who have been uprooted from their homes and who are now refugees, from far away countries in Syria, Libya, Sudan and Somalia

and in our own country, and those still waiting for stasis after Irene, that relief and rebuilding be guided by cooperation and foresight.

And in our own community here, let us model reconciliation as we welcome others to worship, as we extend the hand of peace, as we share the sacrament of forgiveness and new life, and leave behind all that troubles, frightens, or alienates. It's a Christ like thing to do.

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