

# HEALING THROUGH FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

Matthew 5: 21-24

II Corinthians 5: 16-20

Broadview Community United Church of Christ

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Linking forgiveness and healing together is fraught with danger. Last week I stated in the sermon that forgiveness is inextricably linked with justice; that without justice forgiveness may not be possible or at least very difficult. I strongly believe that.

But I also believe that scripture, especially the Gospel lesson we hear today, invites us as Christians to consider another goal, another task - the task of reconciliation. And such reconciliation often cannot happen without forgiveness. So, acknowledging the need for justice in many situations, especially abusive ones, I want to focus today on reconciliation as a goal for healing and forgiveness as one tool to achieve it.

Reconciliation means changing relationships between people, between individuals and God, in a way that moves from brokenness to wholeness. Reconciliation means healing estranged relationships and creating new, healthier ones. There are two facets to reconciliation: one between human beings, and the other between God and us.

In our Matthew reading, Jesus gives his followers new standards. It is not only murder that is wrong, says Jesus, but if we are angry with a sister or brother, we cannot in good conscience offer a gift to God until we reconcile with that person. This scripture gives us a wonderful picture of a worship service moving toward that moment of offering our gifts to God, when suddenly chaos breaks out. This person and that begins to move across the sanctuary to be reconciled with estranged fellow members. The point is not if anger is justified or not, who is right or wrong seems beside the point. At issue is the disrupted relationship and the concrete move toward healing. It is all about unconditional love.

Many people feel estranged from God. We find it difficult to believe that God truly loves us; we feel God is absent from our lives; and often those feelings come because we cannot forgive ourselves for actions we have done or inactions that still bother us. If our parents, our partners, our families have not been people from whom we experienced love, especially unconditional love, it is difficult for us to understand and accept God's love. But God's actions are not those of our mother, father, life partner or sibling. God is greater than all of them. Part of what Jesus came to show us and teach us is that God never *begin* to love us – the love was there from before the beginning. What a powerful idea – that God loved us before we were even us. The power, the purpose of Jesus coming as the incarnated God, is that he is able to transform us, to be the vehicle of our reconciliation with God.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, South African Anglican and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, understands the issues of reconciliation, justice and love better than almost anyone in our world. His sponsorship of the Truth and Reconciliation efforts to heal the devastating pain of apartheid in his country are models of justice/forgiveness/reconciliation. Tutu wrote in a sermon:

*I am created by God who loves me for myself. It has nothing to do with anything extraneous to myself. It is given with who I am.....If I am so important, if I am so valuable, then to dismiss myself as unworthy, to say I cannot be forgiven, is to say God makes mistakes, that I am more powerful than even God. And I do not believe that is true. If I am so valuable and loved than what must also be true, is that every other human being is of equal worth, of equal value. Every Christian must have a passionate concern for his or her brother or sister, his or her neighbor, because to treat any one of these as if they were less than the children of God is to deny the validity of one's own spiritual wholeness.*

If we are reconciled with God, we also, as Christians, have been given the “ministry of reconciliation” as Paul writes it in our scripture from Corinthians. What does it mean to be called reconcilers? What role does forgiveness play in our attempts to be reconcilers with one another? One thing is certain, it usually is not easy.

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Some years ago I was at a church where I tried hard to do ministry as compassionately and skillfully and faithfully as I could. But, as happens in church communities, disagreements arose about how to handle a particular issue. I, and others, supported one course of action, others disagreed. I was verbally attacked by a small group. They were harsh, unloving, and untruthful. I felt battered and angry. I was doing the best I could, and people were telling lies and distorting facts in order to discredit me. It was a crisis of faith and confidence.

But one night I read these words from II Corinthians, “God has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” No way, I thought. I did not want or need to be reconciled to my opponents! I wanted them to apologize for telling lies. And yet.....deep in prayer I knew I needed to reach out, to take the first steps toward reconciliation, to begin to think about forgiveness, because as the body of Christ it was where we needed to stand, and because love demanded that I see even my “enemy” as a child of God. I needed to be reconciled with my brother in Christ before we could worship together.

So I called the most vociferous of my opponents and asked to meet with him. Haltingly I spoke to Carl of my regret at our broken relationship, of how painful our disagreement was to the church, of how I desired reconciliation. I tried not to place blame. I said I knew he was a loving man, committed to this church community as was I. I still felt our proposal was the best way to go but I was trying to understand his position as well. I asked forgiveness for any harshness on my part. He listened coldly, thanked me and left. So much for reconciliation!

But at the Church Council meeting a week later, Carl stood and said he had something to say. He still disagreed with me and others about how to handle this issue and thought we

were wrong. But he acknowledged that in his zeal, he had twisted facts and attributed words to me I had not said. In front of 25 other people, he asked for forgiveness. It was a powerful moment where love, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation came together and I knew healing could happen. We would still disagree about the best way to deal with the issue. But we could worship together and accept each other as sister and brother in Christ.

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Love must be the basis for forgiveness. It is the first step. Repentance is the second one. I tried hard to reach out in love. Carl offered some repentance. Repentance means owning what has happened and acknowledging our responsibility in causing pain. It also includes changing one's behavior so our future behavior is different and more loving. Repentance is turning from and turning to: turning from hurtful behaviors and turning to a more faithful and loving way of being in relationship. If Carl and I were to truly reconcile, his future behavior had to remain honest with me.

If we are the wronged person, Jesus stills calls us to see the person who has hurt us as a valued child of God, loved and precious. Love restores the equal regard for the other as a person of worth. Once that container of unconditional love is offered, then come the negotiations of trust that are necessary for true reconciliation to happen. The sequence goes something like this:

--Someone hurts us.

--We still are called to see that person as a beloved child of God. A sister or brother in Christ.

--Loving them, we need to confront the person and share how much pain s/he has caused us.

--If they offer repentance.

--We offer forgiveness.

--With forgiveness, the journey to reconciliation is possible.

Sounds easy but of course it is not. For one thing, we may not receive the repentance we desire or need. What if the person who has wronged us won't apologize or acknowledge what they have done? What if Carl had not apologized to me? What does Jesus call us to do? I believe we are called to love that person and see them as a child of God. I do not believe we have to forgive them. Unconditional love; conditional forgiveness. (Severe abuse. Even love not possible. Acknowledge that God loves them.)

When real reconciliation is not possible, the best we can do is to tolerate the differences between us without stirring up the pain of the past. The most we can do is make do with what we have – that God loves and accepts us even if other people do not, or we cannot.

But when justice, integrity, repentance, are present, then real reconciliation is possible if one is willing to trust; if one is willing to risk. The willingness to venture out from safe withdrawal and risk again, trust again, invites the possibility of true reconciliation and love.

Tonight some of us will watch the Academy Awards and I am reminded of a movie that won several Oscars nearly 20 years ago. In that movie, *Places in the Heart* set in rural Texas in the 1930's, much pain and brokenness is experienced. In the opening scene a drunken African-American youth accidentally shoots the sheriff of the town and is then himself killed by a lynch mob. A tornado kills several residents. The Klu Klux Klan violently beats an African American man. There are couples where infidelity is destroying their lives. A blind man experiences the pain of being disabled and feeling alone. Racism, poverty, betrayal and pain abound. It would be easy to view this film and feel hopeless and sad. But in the final scene, a wonderful visual metaphor for reconciliation is presented. All the characters from the film are sitting in church together, sharing communion, the living and the dead are present. As the bread and cup are passed, each one says "Peace and love of God" as they pass the elements to their neighbor. The sheriff passes the communion cup to the man who killed him and they share the peace and love of God together. The beaten man receives bread from a KKK member. The couples who lives have been torn by infidelity renew that bond of love. Adults and children alike share in the power of this moment. There are no victims or victimizers. This is a picture of *God's* realm, where true reconciliation is possible.

We see pain all around us; families that are fractured, individuals that are broken; faith communities and whole countries in need of healing. Our sacred task is to reveal the truth that God sent Jesus to reconcile us with God and to give us the task of reconciling with one another. We will fail at times because we are human. But there is one who never fails. God loves us unconditionally. You, each one of you, is a beloved child of that divine love. And no place does that unconditional love reside more deeply than at the Table. In this sacred meal, we have the promise of unconditional love, the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. Here we are made whole.

The power of unconditional love; the power of broken bread and the cup shared. In the sacrament of Communion, in the silence and in receiving these life-giving gifts, we hear and feel that powerful affirmation: God loves us unconditionally. Thanks be to God for that gift. Amen.