

CHRISTIAN LABOR

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Let's talk about reconciliation: its complexity, its skill, its difficulty, and its blessing.

Years ago I was a Chaplain at Good Samaritan Hospital in Dayton, OH. One early morning I got a call from one of the nurses on the surgery floor about a middle aged woman who was having a rough time of it. It seems that each time they tried to prepare her for open heart surgery with a pre-op sedative her blood pressure would escalate so high that they had to postpone her surgery. And yet her heart was in such bad shape that any more postponement would surely mean her death.

As I remember it, I entered the woman's room, and introduced myself, feeling even more inadequate than usual. Three of her grown children and her husband surrounded her bed. I listened for a while as two of daughters valiantly encouraged her not to be afraid. It was my turn to say something, and suddenly I found myself blurting out, "If I was you, I would be *terrified!*" The woman took one look at me and grabbed my hand. Not knowing else do I grabbed the hands of the one next to me, bowed my head, began a prayer, and then invited them all to join in.

Sure enough, as soon as I finished the prayer, no one said a thing. Dead silence. Then I noticed that the husband was struggling to talk, so I waited.

At long last the husband started to pray out loud for his wife, haltingly, but openly and lovingly. All at once, everyone, but most especially the wife was crying, loudly, profusely, even a tad hysterically. All I could think was, "*Now look what I've done!*"

I followed the two daughters outside the door. It was the oldest who told me that none of them had heard one loving word between their parents for the past several years. It seems that some time ago the husband had hurt the wife, or was it the other way around? . . . No one could even remember. But the damage was done, and the parents had each decided that they would show the other just how wronged and how hurt they were, and how right they were in their judgments. That is when the deafening silence began. Thus, night after night the parents sat glaring at each other from each end of the table, with the children in between. The wife would declare to her daughter, "Rachel, remind your father there is a PTA meeting tomorrow night." The Father would then mutter to his son, "Ralph, tell your mother there is too much spice in the meatloaf." Can you imagine the day to day pain of that household?

That particular morning in that far away hospital room there were tears of joy and sorrow. With this one spoken prayer the curse had had held their family ransom for so long was finally lifted. The next day I held the hand of the woman as once more they tried to prepare her for open heart surgery. This time she sailed through with flying colors. The healing of her heart had already begun.

It's been so many years since that brief experience in that far away hospital room, but I have found myself thinking about that family on occasion. I have wondered how things have gone for them since that eventful morning breakthrough. Did things actually get better as the wife's

physical heart healed, or did the old familiar patterns soon sneak back into play once they went back to the familiar psychological walls that made up their home? As I remember, they were a Christian family, formed by a Christian church. Here is our driving question for today. This one family's pain and struggle around their own dinner table is multiplied a hundred million times each day. How can being a part of this church community bring about a reliable and consistent practice of reconciliation that can restore the world to a table set with peace instead of pain?

Jesus minces no words. "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you." Let's just stay with this one verse here this morning, since it is the most difficult of his three point reconciliation plan. After all, how fair is this. Another person offends us, and the onus is on us, *the offended* to seek out the offender. And yet, according to Jesus, we cannot just stand around being inarticulately hurt. We have to get with the program of becoming Christ's body. We must be able to say what the cause of rankling is really, be able to state it in clear terms, and not be wedded to a particular way of seeing things. We Christians must also refrain from predicting what the offender will say. Having the conversation in one's head before having it in person undercuts the possibility of true dialogue.

There is also the niggling question of *courage*. Confronting another person's behavior is never easy. Matt. 18 gives us a clear process for approaching someone who has hurt or offended us; first we are to talk directly with them, not at them or around them. In fact, the first step the Gospel suggests -- the one on one -- is more than often skipped. Straight talk is countercultural in a world that prefers politeness to honesty. In his Rule, Benedict speaks passionately about the deadly poison of "murmuring," the negativity and dissension that can infect community and rot the fabric of love.

Reconciliation also assumes that Christians accused of offending must have certain skills. The gospel builds on the assumption that disciples must be able to *listen*. Listening demands concentration, and in many conversations we tune in and out. But when I am listening to personal criticism, it is especially difficult for me stay focused and attentive. Instead, I am too busy formulating a devastating response. My defenses are in full fury.

Notice how right away Jesus assumes that if there is a church, there is going to be conflict. Conflict, in a *church* you say? So many people still pretend to be shocked. But how could it be otherwise? We are a long standing family, and we share a table as well; we have an ancient table with Jesus at the head; our table stretches back to a particular shared meal. That table was occupied by people just as broken then as it is now with quarrelsome, insecure, and power driven disciples.

I love the fact that even within our Eucharistic liturgy we structure a specific time for the practice of reconciliation. I love that in early house churches when the bishop would finish sharing some stories of Jesus and before he would prepare the table for blessing the bread and the wine to he would call out the names of the people he knew were in conflict. (Everyone always knows who is fighting in any community!) He would call them in front of the table and stand there between them, and he would essentially demand that they work it out, right there between themselves and God and everyone. He and the community would wait as long as it would take. No rush. No pressure. But only when they could finally kiss (or shake hands in our parlance) would the Eucharist be able to continue. Thus, when we exchange our kiss of peace in just a few minutes here it is not because we finally realized we forgot to say hello to the people around us, or even for the sake of meeting the strangers among us. Instead, it is to remind us of our most fundamental work as Christians in the world today. Peace, like most beautiful things, begins small. It begins with what we can change ourselves, but it does not end there. This part of

the liturgy is in place lest there is conflict between you and another person that still needs tending. If so, pause, take care. The table we share was ransomed for a specific purpose, so that the world could be reconciled to God, and nothing less.

Here we sit this morning in this, our stunning church which (thanks to so many of you) is finally undergoing its much needed and long overdue physical repair. Many of us here depend on the doors being opened each Sunday as well as the comfort of our communal prayers and songs. Indeed, the privilege of being here together is nothing I have ever taken for granted, but even more so after last weekend when at this very hour we were each, stranded in our own domiciles due to the threat of Hurricane Irene. What a provocative gospel text to welcome us back, as we open our doors on this Labor Day weekend. Liturgy itself means, "Work of the people". Welcome to our work, our prayer, which is a massive undertaking, both inside the church and out. Just as these walls and windows are being physically being gloriously restored, Jesus offers us a remarkably concrete process for the spiritual rebuilding our souls and the soul of our families, workplaces, and even our great nation through specifically hard work of reconciliation.

"If someone offends you, seek them out, and let them know on a one-on-one how they have offended you."

Is it possible we still have work to do before we now share at the table of life?