

"Reconciliation"

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Let's open our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, bless our community of faith so that in your gracious love, we may be reconciled with you and with each other. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is the Spanish nickname for Francisco. There's a Spanish story about a father who came to Madrid, desperate to reconcile with his son Paco. The father inserted an ad in the personal columns of the newspaper *El Liberal* which said: "Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa." As it turned out, a squadron of the Guardia Civil police had to be called out at noon Tuesday to disperse the eight hundred young men who responded to the ad. The world is full of people in need of reconciliation.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus outlines a process of reconciliation within the fledgling church, formed by the faithful followers of Jesus. Jesus is concerned with church members who sin against each other and are unrepentant. The dispute resolution process that Jesus sets out is similar to those employed by human resources departments today. The first step is for the offended person to have a dialogue with the offending person to try to resolve the problem. The second step is mediation by an HR manager and/or business supervisor. This way there are witnesses to the dialogue and fresh, unbiased perspectives are brought to bear. If this doesn't resolve the situation, then there is usually a more public inquiry and action taken. It's a process that's also similar to the legal systems that we have in society to preserve law and order. It's interesting that these modern dispute resolution processes seem to have started with Jesus!

Corrie ten Boom wrote about not being able to forget a wrong that had been done to her. She had forgiven the person, but she kept rehashing the incident and couldn't sleep. Finally, Corrie cried out to God for help in putting the problem to rest.

Corrie wrote that “[God’s] help came in the form of a kindly Lutheran pastor to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks.” “Up in the church tower,” he said, nodding out the window, “is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First ding, then dong. Slower and slower until there’s a final dong and it stops. I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we’ve been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn’t be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They’re just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down.” Corrie continues, “And so, it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversations, but the force - which was my willingness in the matter - had gone out of them, they came less and less often and at the last stopped altogether.” Reconciliation is a process; a process that begins with forgiveness.

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we begin, “Our Father.” The church is a gathering of the children of God, bound together with God like the members of one family are bound together. If one member of our family is ill, we all hurt and we all support and pray for them; if one person in our family dies, we all grieve together.

The apostle Paul uses the analogy of being like one body; many different parts of one body that are all important to the proper functioning of the whole. If one part of the body is not well, the whole body suffers. An upset stomach, a headache, even a sore toe affects the wellness of the whole body. The suffering of one is the suffering of all; we are incomplete without each other. Jesus healed the sick, cared for the marginalized and gathered together those who were straying, trying to bring each one who is lost back into the fold; he demonstrated forgiveness and grace for each person so that they might each be reconciled with each other and be members of God’s community of love.

In our passage from Paul’s letter to the church at Rome, Paul talks about the importance of love as the heart of the law. Paul says, “‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” Paul told the Corinthians that “faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and

the greatest of these is love." Love is the key characteristic of the Christian church and it's through God's abiding love that we're able to forgive and reconcile with each other.

Amy Biehl was a 26-year-old Fulbright scholar who went to South Africa in 1993 to help register black voters for their first free election. But even though she was seeking to help the people of South Africa, as she was driving one day, she was dragged out of her car, stabbed and beaten to death by a violent mob wanting to overthrow the apartheid government. Soon afterward, Amy's parents, Linda and Peter Biehl, quit their jobs and moved from their Orange County, California home to South Africa - not to seek revenge, but to start a foundation in Amy's name. Two of her killers work for the foundation. They call Mrs. Biehl *Makhulu*, or grandmother, because of the way she treats them. That's the picture of reconciliation. It not only forgives; it reaches out to restore. It pays back good for evil. It's following the heart and character of Jesus.

Church conflict is not new. Paul writes to several of the recently formed churches about resolving conflicts; all sorts of different conflicts, most of which can be resolved privately if we talk them through in a spirit of love and forgiveness. That's step one. Sometimes we need confidential support and that's where the love, prayers and fresh perspectives of the church elders come in. The sinner is protected against arbitrary or hasty actions by a single person and the leaders are protected from their own individual biases. That's step two. A problem never affects just one or two people though, it affects all of us, so if a dispute is not resolved privately, it might require the love and perspectives of others in the congregation to help achieve reconciliation and to protect the congregation from the disruption of unresolved antagonisms. That's step three. But Jesus never gives up.

Next week we'll hear that we must forgive a person not seven times, but seventy-seven times; it's an uncountable number of times to forgive someone; it's as many times as it takes for reconciliation. Jesus says that if personal dialogue, mediation and community measures all fail to achieve reconciliation, we must treat the person like a gentile or a tax collector. Jesus is a friend to gentiles and tax

collectors and in many of his parables, they are set apart as those sinners who become enlightened about the love of God. Therefore, we must continue to forgive and to love sinners as fellow children of God and continue to welcome them into the community, anticipating that we will all be enlightened by God's love for us.

Jesus concludes that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Jesus is here among us supporting us in reconciliation.

There were reportedly some verses written on the wall of Mother Teresa's home for children in Calcutta, India; some say that they were written in her own room. The words have become popular worldwide and have been used in various forms in several popular songs. The verses are based on a composition by Kent Keith that he wrote in 1968 called "The Paradoxical Commandments." This is what was reportedly written on Mother Teresa's wall:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway. If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway. If you are honest and sincere, people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway. What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway. If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway. The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway. Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway. In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.

Where two or three are gathered, there will be conflict that will require faith and forgiveness in the presence of our loving God to reconcile. Fortunately, where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, Jesus is among us. Thanks be to God for this blessed assurance! Amen.