

*A Primer on Reconciliation*

In an article entitled *Six Stories of Sin*, Brian Doyle recounted confessions made to parish pastors or priests. A few do seem a bit shy of the mark of Christian virtue; here is one confession:

“The admission of assault (but not battery) on a squirrel...by a home owner, occasioned by what the home owner characterized as ‘Continual, deliberate provocation’ by the squirrel in question, upon which the home owner’s temper finally snapped, and he did roar at, threaten, insult, denigrate and impugn the squirrel, about which the home owner felt awful later.”

Another was the sin of running up the score of a little league game because one of the coaches had once dated and rather unceremoniously dumped the wife of the other coach. Faced with the opportunity to avenge his wife’s offense, the coach told his team to apply the full-court press despite being up by 24 points. The coach felt guilty the next day and sought the counsel of the priest, who asked him if he’d like to confess. The coach replied, “Well, no. We only won by 32. That’s not a sin – winning by 50 would have been a sin.”<sup>1</sup>

And then there are the times when there is no mal-intention, just thoughtlessness. I am in mind of a time my friend Sally was seated with her back to the door of a restaurant during a vicious cold snap, and each time the door would swing open, she’d brace herself for the cold blast. Finally, the door stayed open and she reflexively said, loudly, “CLOSE THE DOOR,” only to turn around and see that the very elderly woman coming into the restaurant had gotten the wheel of her oxygen tank caught on the doorframe.

It was her second-grade Sunday School teacher.

Any of us can, if we are honest, remember a time when we know we should have, and could have acted better. That’s only one of a multitude of reasons why I do not have a fish on the trunk of my car. I would remain in a state of constant apology.

*We all know when we should have done better.*

There is a prevailing wind in preaching theory these days that says that sermons should only ever be good news – I’m with them on that – but further, that the preacher should avoid using “should,” or “ought,” or even “God calls us to...”

With all due respect to the theoreticians, we all know when we should have done better, and no avoidance of certain auxiliary verbs will change that basic fact.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Doyle in *The Christian Century* July 23, 2014

We all know when we need to confess our sin – I appreciate the honesty of those of you who tell us that we don't leave enough time between the corporate confession and the kyrie... I appreciate the honesty it takes to admit that we're already to "believe the promise of the Gospel," but and you have not yet gotten through Tuesday.

Our honesty is all well and good, but what about when the equation reverses? What about when you are the wronged party?

And what about when it *really* matters?

It's fine to laugh and chuckle about slapstick sins, but what about when it really matters, when you're the one who is hurt to the core, when you're not a hundred percent sure you even *want* to reconcile what is wrong?

How hard is it then to follow Jesus's commandment?

What Jesus has to say on the matter could be boiled down to basic good advice for resolving differences. Sadly, it is also advice that most of us won't ever *actually* follow.

Look at what he says: If someone sins against you, you have to tell them.

I don't know about you, but I'm not inclined to tell someone when they hurt my feelings. I'm much more inclined to stew about it.

We *might* be inclined to talk about it too – to *other* people.

Edwin Friedman calls this triangulation. Don't tell the person who hurt your feelings, tell someone else, and then you expect them to tell the person who hurt your feelings, and it's all handled behind the scenes.

(Triangulation isn't limited to communicating about hurt feelings, and generally speaking, it is a bad method of communication.)

But Jesus says there is a way for reconciliation to unfold.

If someone sins against you – tell them when it is just the two of you.

Don't gossip about it.

Don't bring in a third party.

Don't simmer and seethe.

*Tell the truth.*

That's so hard to do. But if you do it, Jesus says, that one is regained. Community is preserved. I wish I could tell you that I have a perfect track record on this, but I don't. Maybe you don't either. We should take note for ourselves.

Only after step one can we go to step two.

Step two is when another person goes with you to deal with the sin. And note that it is not triangulation, it is still direct communication. If someone has hurt you, you still have to tell them.

Then comes stage three. This the stage where the whole church gets involved. I have to confess this seems impracticable to me at this point, and it's not just because I'm the pastor and I know I'm going to have to listen to it all if we go down this road. No, it is hard to affect reconciliation on a large scale.

There's a difference between annoying and irritating someone and sinning against them.

Annoying someone is just that, it is grit in the gears. It is personalities not jiving. It is differences of opinion on things that sometimes matter a great deal, but at the end of the day it's still just opinion.

Sin is different. Sin is *brokenness*.

If you annoy me, I'm probably not going to tell you. If I annoy you, I probably don't need to hear about it.

But if the relationship between us is broken, we have a responsibility to address it. If the relationship between you and your child is broken, it needs to be addressed. If the relationship between you and the person you share your life with is broken, it needs to be addressed.

*God does not want us to persist in brokenness.*

Brokenness, unfortunately, is the path of least resistance. That is what makes it so pernicious. That is why Jesus knew how deadly it is to remain in sin.

Because sin *is* brokenness and sin *causes* brokenness.

Sin causes gun violence.

Sin causes unequal health outcomes.

Sin causes division and rancor. Sin destroys charity and mutual forbearance.

It is not a pleasant topic precisely because it *hurts* us.

Sin caused that in your life you do not want to name but you know is not right.

That is true for me as well.

From the very beginning, sin does all of these things by destroying community.

Sure, we can stumble along with things broken for a while, but it always affects us. Just as trauma theorists remind us that the body keeps score of what has hurt us, sin does not just go away. It must be dealt with.

Not all resolutions are neat and clean. Not all resolutions are happy. But the idea of continuing in brokenness runs counter to the wholeness that God wants for us.

And God does want us to be whole!

God wants that for us individually, and God wants that for communities.

Jesus has given us the most extraordinary basic good advice that most of us won't follow...but it's not just advice... it is a command.

What Jesus is commanding is *community*.

It is real community, not just pleasant associations, and nice acquaintanceship, but real and deep community that cares for the fabric of creation in a way that drafts us into God's creative and redemptive activity.

It is a way of life; a costly way of life, because it demands something of us.

There is a real difference between what is *expensive* and what is *costly*. What is expensive may or may not be worth much. A car or a piece of jewelry may be expensive, but at the end of the day, they are not worth a thing other than money.

But real relationships where truth is told and burdens are shared?

Those are worth something. Real relationships where when the world comes crashing in those united to us in Christ will be there. That is what is important. That is what is at stake, and that is why it is worth the discomfort and unease of telling the truth.

Jesus said one last thing on the matter – he said if those steps don't work, let the sinner be like a tax collector or a gentile to you.

He surely knew that there are some folks who won't change, no matter how directly they are confronted. He surely knew that there are some people who are unwilling or unable to face up to what they have done to others. Perhaps it sounds harsh, but there is a great kindness in recognizing that we do not change other people. Sometimes the kindest, most caring thing we can do for ourself is simply to step away, trusting that Jesus has a real thing for tax collectors and gentiles. Jesus does not require us to chase reconciliation to the point of perpetual reinjury.

*We can't fix everything, and that is when we leave a little room for Jesus.*

That is good news. That is the promise of the Gospel: God is never done with us. Forgiveness is the bedrock of our life together. It is what God has given us, even knowing it is costly to forgive.

But note this: Reconciliation does not mean giving the offending party what they want. It means releasing yourself from holding that burden and relinquishing your claim to vengeance because of it.

Elsewhere in the pages of the Bible, we read that we are not even supposed to give our offering with a grudge on our hearts<sup>2</sup>, so if you are harboring a grudge, perhaps let the church carry the giving for you for this week. Nor may we approach communion without examining ourselves – you can't feed a grudge from this table, so bear that in mind the next time we come to this heavenly feast.<sup>3</sup>

I have spent most of my ministry working to ensure that the church is a place of deep hospitality, inclusivity, and welcome. It matters deeply to me for you to know that all are welcome in this church, unconditionally.

But *how* we come matters. I would do you a disservice today if I suggested that the beloved community that Christ offers does not require us to work on ourselves.

Many of you may know the ancient Cherokee wisdom that there are two wolves within each of us vying for control of our soul – one wolf is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed arrogance, and the like, and the other wolf is goodness, benevolence, generosity, truth – all of those virtues we Christians might call the fruits of the Spirit. When the story culminates, a young man asks his grandfather which wolf will win.

“The one you feed,” he replies.

Jesus is asking us to do the hardest thing we will do in life: to find it within ourselves to seek reconciliation when relationships are broken.

I won't pretend it is easy.

I don't know anything Jesus didn't know when he said all these things.

Life together is *that* important.

When it comes down to the last analysis, our life together is what he has given us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:4

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:27