

“Reconciliation”

Matthew 5:21-26

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What an amazing time in the history of the world we are living in. The events in Egypt over the past week have been absolutely remarkable. A people’s revolution to transform a dictatorship into a democracy. People shouting that they are free and their freedom came about not with guns or bombs but by 100’s of thousands of people flooding the streets and refusing to move until a new system of government was made possible.

After nearly three weeks of occupying the central square of Cairo people celebrated the departure of a corrupt despot. Then after much celebrating the people brought out brooms, shovels and garbage bags to beautify the grounds of their protest and begin the symbolic work of building a new government. Those who had been silenced took back their voice and spoke the words they had wanted to speak for 30 years.

These historic events reminded me of so many liberation movements that have occurred in my life time – the end of Apartheid in South Africa, the fall of the Berlin Wall and break-up of Soviet Union, the end of segregation and forms of structural racism in the U.S., the peace agreement between Egypt’s Anwar Sadat and Israel’s Menachem Begin, the resolution of differences in Northern Ireland. There have been remarkable events that have taken place in just a few decades, events that came about because people spoke up and voiced their disagreement and offense. If they had remained silent, violence, oppression, abuse would have continued unchecked.

For the sake of God’s world and all people, the imperative to speak up when one has been wronged is the voice of hope. In the gospel of Matthew Jesus offers compelling words about conflicts and reconciliation.

When trying to communicate the reasons why speaking to each other about a dispute is vitally important, Jesus says: “I tell you whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven.” In this way Jesus is raising the level of importance that addressing our conflicts and being reconciled to each other, reaches.

Like so many other dimensions of my relationships, I have a tendency to believe that my disputes and times of conflict with others are purely personal and private. I have a tendency to believe that concealing an offense done to me affects only me. But Jesus, as he always does, refuses to let us isolate ourselves in this way. Jesus makes it clear that our brokenness is something that requires healing, and if it isn't, our relationships, our communities and even heaven suffers with us. "Whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven."

When Jesus referenced heaven he was speaking of God's intentions for creation, he was speaking of God's desires for us. For a host of reasons, I can tell myself that I shouldn't tell someone when they have harmed me, or betrayed my trust, but when I don't speak I weaken my relationships. This may sound like the opposite of what we think is true, but if we don't speak it may essentially give permission for the offenses to continue, it may reflect a belief that the relationship cannot handle the truth, and it may mean that we no longer have someone else to blame if our life doesn't seem to be what we want it to be.

It was not so long ago that a family member of mine was divorced. He is one of the kindest and most responsible people I know. He fell in love with his wife at an early age and soon after being married at age 18 his first child was born. Even at this early age he worked incredibly hard, providing for his family the best he could. He was and is a deeply loving father to his three kids and now his 6 grandchildren. Whenever someone in his family needed him he was there for them, but he often felt that no one returned his generosity and care, including his wife. He had difficulty asking for help, he thought that it should be obvious to those who love him that he needed their presence or assistance, but it seldom came. Instead of talking to his wife and kids about this he mostly kept silent and over the course of more than 40 years his anger and hurt deepened. Finally he left his wife, urgently needing to take care of himself.

For many years this member of my family held his pain inside till he could not bear the addition of more pain. Because he didn't speak up, his confused family sees only that he left his wife without cause and has caused them deep hurt.

The hurt and offenses that we experience are not ours alone they affect the people we love and they can break God's heart. "What we bind on earth is bound in heaven."

Jesus knew how deeply important resolving disputes, conflicts and offenses were and are. So he tries to teach people what to do when relationships are broken.

In our passage Jesus says: “Not only do I tell you not to murder or you will be judged, I also tell you anyone who is angry with his brother or sister and does not go to them will also be judged. Anyone who says ‘Raca’ of another will be sent to the courts (Raca is a derogatory cursing term.) Before you place your gift of gratitude on the altar, become reconciled with the one you are angry with.”

With these words Jesus elevates the importance of each of us speaking to persons we are at odds with. Jesus makes it clear that resolving a conflict with a brother, sister, friends, acquaintance, or even a stranger, is necessary before we can offer a gift of gratitude to God. The point here is that Jesus found the reconciling of our relationships to be of greater value than placing a gift on the altar.

In this passage Jesus says the first step in resolving a conflict is to speak directly to the person. He clarifies this truth in chapter 18 of Matthew’s gospel when he says: “go to this person alone and in private.”

Going to the person first and alone creates the greatest opportunity to resolve a problem without it escalating. The beginning place of reconciliation is when we speak what is on our heart and mind as our own concern. When we are hurt, or angry, or in disagreement we may be in an uncomfortable position, but we are most likely to gain satisfaction and reconciliation when we present our concern as our own experience, and not what others are saying. This requires a degree of courage, but most matters of importance in our lives require courage.

I must stress here that going individually to a person who is abusive or violent is not what Jesus is suggesting. In situations of abuse it is deeply important to share your situation with others so that abuse will not take place again.

But barring abusive relationships, Jesus knew that the first step toward “gaining one’s brother or sister” when a dispute is present is that of telling the person your concern. It is amazing to me how often the offending person was unaware of what they had done or said, or if not unaware it was not what they had intended.

I remember an interaction I had with one of my kids a few years ago. I asked them why they hadn't told me about a difficulty they were having with a friend. They told me that they didn't tell me because I get so sympathetic and so concerned for them that they sometimes feel worse after talking to me. They said they wanted me to listen but not treat them like a helpless little kid. I responded by saying that I had no idea that this was what I was doing and that I could change and recognize their strength even when they were hurting. This conversation opened up new doors in our relationship.

Afterwards I had a deep sense of gratitude within me.

Jesus said, "what we bind on earth we bind in heaven." By saying this he elevates what takes place among us on earth. He teaches over and over that addressing our conflicts and disputes in our personal relationships as well as on much grander scales is more important than placing our gifts on an altar. That which God desires most is the strengthening of our relationships, the clarifying of our brokenness and the possibility of reconciliation among us. Though we may try to convince ourselves that we are not angry, hurt or, as was true in Egypt, oppressed, what God desires is that we raise our voices in the hope of greater justice, dignity and love. May it be so.