

"A MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION"

INTRODUCTION

Listen to these words of Jesus spoken in the Sermon on the Mount: "So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

In other words, if you are on your way to church on a Sunday morning and you remember that you have done something that has offended or hurt or wronged someone else, go home and get that straightened out first, and then come to church.

DEVELOPMENT

Jesus knew that one of the saddest things about people is that they cannot always get along with each other. It's all the sadder.....because when they do get along, it is such a wonderful thing to see. For instance, when you see two persons working and living together in harmony and in understanding, is there anything more wonderful than that? But the tragic thing is that so many people, so much of the time, cannot get along with each other. In their casual day to day dealings they rub each other the wrong way. They say things and they do things with deliberate intent to hurt another person. Sometimes they do it without any intention of doing it, sometimes they do it without ever knowing they have done it, ~~but many times you cannot help but feel that they have done it deliberately.~~ We are not voracious, but we all have our own invisible quills that we use either deliberately or not when our hostilities begin to go into action.

How many families are there represented here in this congregation this morning in which there are no serious tensions - no disagreements that lead to disagreeable scenes; no quarrels over a will; no resentment between child and parent; no real friction between husband and wife; no feelings hurt by things said in anger? I have no idea, really, but I would venture to say that few families could score a perfect record.

And if this is true in families, how much more likely it is true in the other relationships of life. Think how many people are separated in this world of ours by just two things: religious beliefs and political opinions. I know of a family, a Jewish family, whose son married outside his faith; he married a girl of the Protestant Church. The mother and father of that young man were violently opposed to the marriage; they refused for the longest time to meet the girl; they refused to attend the wedding service. They have just about lost a son. ~~They have just about wrecked any opportunity for happiness within that marriage.~~ Their attitude has put it under a severe strain. I have two friends who are quite different in their political opinions - one is a natural born conservative and the other is liberal in his approach to everything. At this moment, their friendship is under a severe strain; it's on the verge of being shattered by this difference in their thinking. They are even beginning to make false accusations against each other; the liberal is calling the conservative a "reactionary" and the conservative is calling the liberal a "pink".

And if this be true of individuals, how much more likely it is to be true of nations which, as one man has written, are "but a few men magnified....."

JESUS KNEW ALL THIS...

Jesus knew all this about human beings, and it was probably something he learned from his own personal first hand experience - from the relationship he had with his own family, which was anything but harmonious; and then from the relationships which he had with people outside the family - the scribes, the Pharisees, the hard-hearted and the pig-headed, the well-meaning but the wrongly guided. He also knew that it was the will of God for men to live together in harmony; not necessarily in agreement, but in harmony. We are not all made alike; we cannot all think alike; we cannot live according to the same rules, but Jesus believed that it was the will of God that men and women should live in a relationship of understanding with each other in spite of their many differences, and he therefore said that men who had been separated must be reconciled - "brought together" is what the word means. The bringing together of two people who have been torn asunder; reconciliation - one of the most beautiful words in the English language, standing as it does for one of the miracles of human life.

Furthermore, Jesus said, this is more important, this bringing together of people who have been separated, than going to church. "If you remember that your brother has anything against you, first be reconciled to your brother". He couldn't make it much plainer than that.

BUT THIS CAN BE DIFFICULT

So much is clear. But when we begin to stop and think about it, we realize that it is not at all an easy thing to do. In fact, it is almost impossible.

For one thing, it is difficult for many of us (and I include myself) to think that we are ever in the wrong. For most of us, not all of us, but for most of us it is difficult to think that we might be in the wrong in a particular situation. I ask you to search your own heart and mind on this matter. In the hostilities in which you have taken a personal part, in how many of them have you been anything but the innocent party in your own mind? Even though you say, "Of course, it's largely my own fault", do you ever really believe it? Do you ~~know~~ secretly think you are the injured one?
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This is partly our own self-defense: for a person who thinks that he does the wrong thing is sick and ends up doing nothing. We must have a certain measure of self-confidence in what we do; but with so many people it can become a stubborn form of blindness to their own faults that prevents any kind of reconciliation. May I say this that in my own experience (and here I am speaking only about personal relationships) - I have never known a situation where all the wrong was on one side. Perhaps you have, but I never have. More often than not, there ~~is~~ apt to be some short-comings on both sides.
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A second thing that is apt to make it difficult for us to be reconciled with our brother is that even when we do see that we have done the wrong thing, it is almost impossible for many of us to say so. We're too proud to admit it. A person has to have a real sense of security to be able to say to another person, "I'm wrong; I made a mistake". If you're on the defensive, if you're not sure of your ground, if you're not rooted in something solid, in something in which you have absolute confidence, it is almost impossible for you to say to anybody, "I've made a mistake. I'm sorry". This is one of the most difficult things in the world for some of us to do. Our pride will not let us do it.

And there is still the further difficulty that arises when the other person is not willing to accept our approach. Suppose there has been an unpleasant difference of opinion between yourself and another person, and you have brought yourself to the position of being willing to make the first move to heal the breach, and you call that person on the telephone and suppose he hangs up on you. Suppose he makes no response then at all to your overture. The chapter is closes as far as he is concerned. It takes two to make a rift; it takes two to work out a reconciliation, and if the other person is not willing to respond, then all of your efforts are in vain.

TAKING THIS FURTHER

These then are some of the difficulties involved in the act of reconciliation, and I am sure that all of you have tasted them in one form or another. You may wonder then, in the face of the difficulties, how Jesus could ever expect us or anybody else, to be reconciled with our opponents, those who wish us evil, or those who have this instinctive desire to hurt. The answer to all of this lies deep beneath the surface.

I believe that it is true, and I may be wrong, but I believe that it is true that underneath all of our human frictions there is a deeper one. So many of our human frictions stem from the fact that we are not at peace with life itself. It may be that we have some secret grievance against life, that it has not given us what we feel it should have, that it has not produced what we thought it ought to have produced for us, and our dreams have been shattered. Or, if we are of a different temperament, we think that it has a grievance against us. We may see ourselves as failures, as not having lived up to our possibilities. I think the language of the New Testament would describe us as not being "at peace with God". This is the basic unsettlement that is beneath all of our human squabbles. "At peace with God" - "At peace with life" - which ever way you want to put it doesn't make too much difference for both are related to each other.

You ask, when the New Testament talks about being "at peace with God" what exactly is involved. This is not easy to put into words, but I think for one thing it would involve an acceptance of God's way as we see it expressed in the life of our Lord.....it means having confidence, having a trust or a faith in the power of God, a feeling that the weight of the universe rests on the side of goodness, and it means a desire to do God's will. This gives us a security that we did not have before so that we can look at ourselves

more objectively and see the rough spots and admit the mistakes and blemishes that are there. And it helps us to see others in a different light, with a greater tolerance for their mistakes, with more allowance for their fallibility as human beings, and with a greater appreciation of their dignity. And it gives us a power to persevere at all costs with Christ to continue his ministry of reconciliation in the world, to carry on this work of bringing people together who once had been separated.

SPECIFIC WORDS AND PRACTICAL ADVICE

And may I leave with you one or two words at the end

by way of practical advice and specific steps.

One thing we can do to help others who are tempted to blind fury, is to help them control their tempers and their ill considered judgements, to ask them to think twice before they speak out, to ask them if they have all of the facts, to ask them to be ready to look at themselves and to see whether they may bear some of the responsibility for the total situation which has apparently brought them to the boiling point.

And the second thing: we can begin right now, today, in our own broken relationships, - with those in our family circle, with those in our circle of acquaintances - where there are rifts, feuds, factions and hard feelings - we can begin right now, where we are, to heal those relationships. Remember this: human relationships are the most precious thing in the world, more worth saving than anything else you can think of. You cannot afford to lose one.

One final statement. I have a conviction, and it grows stronger with each year that passes, that this is one of the primary tests of a Christian - how he treats other people and whether or not he is involved in this ministry of reconciliation. I have the feeling, too, that the world is looking at those of us who bear the name Christian with a very careful and critical eye to see how we treat other people. And if Christianity has nothing to offer men in the realm at which they are at odds with each other, the chances are that it won't be long before it disappears and fades away.

PRAYER: Help us, O God, as we try to find our way, especially in relation to those who differ from us, those who are opposed to us, those with whom we find it difficult to get along.....and keep our eyes always on that new dimension of love revealed in the life of Jesus in whose name we pray. Amen