

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Year A

The Gift of Reconciliation

[RCL] Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Immediately after His Baptism and following the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus, according to the Gospel of Matthew, presents a discourse of moral teachings we have come to know as “The Sermon on the Mount.”

It is a portion of these instructions that we experience in today’s Gospel. Jesus eloquently presents a series of specific and shared understandings or interpretations of the law of Moses and contrasts them with a renewed way of looking at these matters. He begins these statements with, “You have heard that it was said” and by concluding, saying, “but I say to you”; thus, presenting the true intent of the law through the lens of Jesus's message.

St. Augustine of Hippo stated in his book “Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” that “if anyone, will piously and soberly consider the sermon which our Lord Jesus Christ spoke on the mount, as we read it in the Gospel according to Matthew, I think that he will find it, so far as regards the highest morals, a perfect standard of the Christian Life”

One of those standards highlighted in today’s Gospel is reconciliation. Jesus, through specific examples, shares with His disciples the negative impact of unresolved and conflictive human interactions, offering at the same time a mechanism for accountability and a path towards mending broken relationships.

For real reconciliation to occur, we must not only meditate and identify the offense, but also value the relationship that may be jeopardized by such offense. It requires openness of heart to engage in dialogue and to seek the restoration of that particular relationship. God desires for us to live in relationship with one another. When our relationships are broken, other areas of our lives may become off-balance to the extent that, at times, it may impact our ability to function.

Broken relationships separate us from one another and, in some ways, from God. At times, we are oblivious to the impact of our actions in the life of others. Our intent may be genuine or without malice, and the impact in others may be devastating. Pride may also play a significant role, impeding us from reconciling with those whom we love and love us, and from those who differ from us. As Christians, we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are called to build bridges, not walls.

In the current state of affairs in our nation, a difference of opinions at the political and ethical level has caused a visible divide among families, friends, and communities. It is practically a common occurrence to hear friends "de-friending" each other's pages in social media as a result of political debates or opposing points of views about relevant and challenging topics.

How may we find common ground in the midst of our differences? How may we, even during challenging and uncertain times, create spaces for dialogue and reconciliation?

Jesus came to this world to reconcile us with God. It is that ministry of reconciliation that encourages us to create spaces for healthy and productive dialogue. It is that ministry of reconciliation that urges us to remain faithful to our vocation of love where we reject sin while embracing the sinner.

Author and researcher, Brené Brown, shared a cartoon about “Empathy versus Sympathy” at a RSA talk in 2013. Brown shares that “Empathy feels connection while sympathy drives disconnection”. She describes empathy as the ability to take on the perspective of another person while staying out of judgment, recognizing the emotions in other people and communicating that. Brené accurately states that “Empathy is a choice and it is a vulnerable choice.”

Having empathy for those with whom we differ may provide us an opportunity to listen attentively to their perspectives, creating spaces for holy conversations that may lead to reconciliation or even positive changes in the midst of profound and basic disagreement of ideology.

We can choose to nurture our divides and remain in a state of tension and dissension, or, we may decide to be open to the movement of the Spirit and focus on that which unite us, God's love for humanity, and work together through our disagreements.

There is a story of a married couple who argue frequently. They have been married for 38 years. Both of them were known to have strong characteristics and were quick to temper. One evening they engaged in yet another heated and emotionally charged conversation. The wife, reaching a point of no return, decided to pack a few things and walk away. While packing, she noticed that her husband placed another suitcase next to her and started packing as well. With a huff, she asked him, "Where in the world are you going?" Her husband responded, in an angry tone, “I don't know. I am going wherever it is that you are going!”.

Similar to the case of this married couple, our disagreements, political or not, are not sufficient ground to separate us. We are bonded by something greater.

Avoidance of contact is a defense mechanism we may use to evade our responsibility to foster reconciliation and unity. Reconciliation is hard work. It is holy work.

Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, preached in Guatemala in August of 2011. In his sermon, he shared, “The gift of the church to the world is reconciliation. We have been given it as a gift for ourselves so that we may know God, and we have been given it to learn.”

As a church, we have a unique opportunity to become bridge-builders during this historic time in America. We have a chance to exercise our prophetic voices in powerful and unique ways, at the same time that we spread and teach the gift of reconciliation in our nation.

Jesus, our model, faced confrontations with determination and compassion. It is a healthy and necessary balance to mend and maintain challenging relationships.

Jesus's determination ensured that the dignity of every human being was respected. His compassion showed God's love to those who were difficult to love.

May we find holy balance in these challenging times to maintain a reconciliatory tone while challenging the injustices against God's children in a way that foster dialogue and build bridges. Not an easy task, but a necessary one. Amen.

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