

Epiphany 6A (2/16/2020)
 Deuteronomy 30:15-20
 Psalm 119:1-8
 1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

Reconciliation is first and foremost the duty of the party responsible for the injury. But, what does it take to truly acknowledge an offense and restore a relationship? The work of reconciliation is a spiritual discipline, a precondition for the offering of our gifts to God. And as such, it lies at the heart of God's intent for our life together.

Did you know that Jesus' exhortation to reconciliation in our Gospel from Matthew today is ritualized every Sunday in our liturgy? "When you are offering your gift at the altar," he says, "if you remember that your [sibling] has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your [sibling], and then come and offer your gift." Can you place it? This scripture informs our weekly passing of the Peace, which occurs, not coincidentally, just before the Offering and Holy Communion. The manual on the liturgy explains:

The exchange of peace is a ministry, an announcement of grace we make to each other.... This ministry... is far greater than a sociable handshake or ritual of friendship or a moment of informality. Because of the presence of Jesus Christ, we give to each other what we are saying: Christ's own peace.... [Thus] the community that comes to [the altar]... has been given the gift of reconciliation in Christ.¹

But, **if reconciliation is a gift, it's also a spiritual discipline.** "Go; first be reconciled to your [sibling], and then come and offer your gift." Jesus insists on repentance and forgiveness – the work of social healing, the work of peace – as a

¹ *The Sunday Assembly*, 173.

precondition for making an offering at the altar. **Our manner of relating to each other**, in other words, **shapes our manner of relating to God**.

If we were to take Jesus' command literally, however, then few of us would be worthy of bringing our gifts to the altar on a regular basis. True reconciliation is difficult to achieve in a moment, or even a week. **We don't tend to deal directly with our hurts and regrets, preferring to bury them beneath a pleasant exterior**. It's easier to just shake hands and smile than to name what's troubling you; it's easier to just say, "The peace of Christ be with you," than to actually mean it.

Of course, avoidance is not only a problem for interpersonal relationships. The refusal to deal with social friction, to face uncomfortable truths head on, is a trend throughout our society. When large-scale resentments linger, we tend to obscure them, even at the risk of allowing them to boil over. How healthy, for instance, are our national conversations about politics or religion? All the more reason to take Jesus' teaching on reconciliation seriously. **How can we expect the peace of Christ to pervade our communities if we're unwilling to engage in the hard work of reconciliation to that end?**

Probing this dilemma a little more deeply, we tend to assign the responsibility for reconciliation largely to the offended party. After all, Jesus warns, "If you are angry with [your sibling], you will be liable to judgment." We've often taken that to mean, *When you've been harmed, don't let your anger simmer; be reconciled to your offender, and get over it*. But, a closer look at the text

reveals an important insight: “When you are offering your gift at the altar,” Jesus says, “if you remember that your [sibling] *has something against you*... go; first be reconciled....” And, he goes on to say, “Come to terms quickly with *your accuser* while you are on your way to court....” The assumption is that I’ve wronged someone else. Thus, **reconciliation is first and foremost the duty of the party responsible for the injury.**

No wonder we practice avoidance. We’re reluctant to admit our brokenness, both individual and corporate; we’re disinclined to repent of the systemic sins that continue to inform our common life. *Go*, Jesus insists, *first be reconciled to your kindred*. But, what does it take to truly acknowledge an offense and restore a relationship that has been strained for so long? It certainly doesn’t help to expect wounded people to keep quiet and get over it. And, it’s not good enough to simply ignore the reality. “Not everything that is faced can be changed,” writes James Baldwin, “but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” **Only courageous and vulnerable conversation will do, only the willingness to hear the hurts of others and to risk being changed for the sake of true reconciliation, true peace.**

In *Waking Up White*, Debbie Irving charts her journey toward antiracism in her life and work. By way of conclusion, let me share with you her reflection on the role that brave and honest conversation plays in the movement for racial justice: [Excerpt from pp.174-5].