

Being Reconciled
Matthew 18:15-20
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Shortly before he died Lenoard Cohen released his final album entitled *You Want It Darker*. The album is about the preparation for death. Its lyrics are rich and solemn and soulful.

One song that has captured my attention since I first heard it is entitled "Treaty." The lyrics of the refrain are:

I wish there was a treaty we could sign
I do not care who takes this bloody hill
I'm angry and I'm tired all the time
I wish there was a treaty
I wish there was a treaty
Between your love and mine

The rest of the lyrics include a strange mix of allusions to God and Jesus and more intimate references. One reviewer, awed by this song, described it as blurring "prayer and love song, spiritual meditation and erotic lament." The reviewer continued that the song "doesn't so much blur them as speak from that deep place where the agonies of love and the insoluble questions of the spirit are inherently one and the same."

He senses that the song recognizes the "simultaneous miracle and impossibility of a particular relationship."

When I hear the song I hear someone, facing the end of his life, who is struggling to reconcile a relationship. The relationship has meant a lot to him, brought him joy and love and intimacy. Yet it has been damaged, and he wants to find some means of repairing it. He doesn't want to be angry anymore. He wants peace.

Leonard Cohen longs for a peace treaty that will repair his damaged relationship. And in today's Gospel passage Jesus lays out for us a very specific procedure that we are to follow to heal the broken relationships in our lives. Rarely is the New Testament so specific and detailed in the advice that it gives. And this particular advice doesn't seem to be conditioned by cultural context—it is advice that we could and should still apply in the twenty-first century.

This is more than practical advice, it is also a spiritual practice which is essential to us being the church God has called us to be. The church is supposed to be a community who are friends to one another – genuine friends who trust each other and can be honest with one another. We are to love each other and work together in the unity of the Body of Christ. How

do we embody peace, harmony, and unity? We must learn the practices of forgiveness and reconciliation.

But we aren't very good at it because it is genuinely difficult. To become good at forgiveness and reconciliation means that we must unlearn many bad habits. We must unlearn taking offense easily. We must unlearn defensiveness and selfishness. We must quit gossiping. We have to develop patience and self-control and humility. We have to learn to be honest, tactful, and compassionate all at the same time. We have to learn to listen. We have to try to understand something from a different person's perspective. It means developing a sense of fairness and mercy.

In other words—a lifetime of character formation and habituation in the virtues. The virtues, at root, are skills for successful living and human flourishing. The contemporary philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre puts it this way:

If a human life is understood as a progress through harms and dangers, moral and physical, which someone may encounter and overcome in better and worse ways and with a greater or lesser measure of success, the virtues will find their place as those qualities the possession and exercise of which generally tend to success in this enterprise and the vices as qualities which likewise tend to failure.

Then how do we cultivate these basic life skills necessary for human flourishing? We have to practice them. When we are learning to play baseball, there are a set of skills that we have to develop. We have to work at throwing and catching and hitting. For most people, these don't come naturally but have to develop over time with lots of work. Plus, we don't generally develop these skills alone. We learn in the context of a group of people, and we learn from teachers. We can't learn to throw a ball well by ourselves. We generally begin in early childhood playing catch with our parents. And we continue to develop that skill with friends and coaches and teammates. And some of never become very good at it, myself included.

There are many Christian spiritual practices that are all meant to shape and form us. Things like prayer and meditation, caring for the sick, tithing, congregational singing, celebrating communion, etc. These practices are the means of developing the skills and virtues required to live as Jesus did.

And one of those sets of practices are detailed here in Matthew 18, a detailed procedure for how to forgive and find reconciliation.

One of the best theological works on this topic is *Embodying Forgiveness* by L. Gregory Jones. He writes,

Most fundamentally, then, forgiveness is not so much a word spoken, an action performed, or a feeling felt as it is an embodied way of life in an ever-deepening friendship with the Triune God and with others.

Jones goes on:

Habits and practices require discipline, patience, and skill, and they are central means for forming people in the virtues necessary for friendship with God; there are no easy techniques, no ways to bypass struggles through self-help manuals.

Because it is so difficult, Jones reminds us that “forgiveness involves the life-long process of learning a craft.”

Near the end of his book, Jones summarizes several features that come together in the craft of forgiveness:

truthful judgment about what has happened or is happening, a willingness to acknowledge both the propriety of anger, resentment, or bitterness and a desire to overcome and be freed from it, a concern for the well-being of the others as children of God, recognition of the ways in which we have all needed to be forgiven, an acknowledgment that the truthful judgment requires accountability directed toward the grace of new life, and the hope for eventual reconciliation (though in extreme cases, this may be a matter of “hoping against hope”).

Therefore, in order to be good at this process as outlined in Matthew, we’ve got to be working on other things – honesty, graciousness, patience, humility, compassion, controlling our anger, etc. I think that one way we do that is by engaging in the variety spiritual practices like prayer, meditation, worship, gardening, playing music, going for walks, etc., because these spiritual practices open us to God for transformation. I know that when I do those things I am calmed and gain new perspectives. I find that it is easier to control my anger, easier to be humble, easier to be patient. When I’m not regularly observing them, there is a difference in my attitude and interactions with other people. I’m more short-tempered, more direct and caustic, I’m just not as nice a person to be around.

So, let’s explore the details of this procedure a little more.

It first reminds us of a simple truth--most issues can be resolved by a simple one-on-one conversation. Most of the time people didn’t intend any harm. Or once they hear your story, then they will gain more perspective and feel differently. These are probably conversations that should occur, when they can, in person and not on the phone or via e-mail.

When you meet to talk, the goal is never to argue; the goal is reconciliation. Each side should tell their story and try to come to some sense of understanding. It may require talking numerous times. It may mean that you have to wait sometime before talking in order to let tempers settle down. I’m not wise enough to know how to work this out in each situation. I’m not very good at it myself. But I hope I’m getting better with each year. Just remember, always keep reconciliation in mind.

On rare occasions the situation will be so serious that reconciliation is not found by talking together, then it is time to seek help. The purpose of drawing others in is not to have a witness to advocate for your side, it is to find a mediator to help the situation. I wish that churches would actually work at training people in this specific task, people who could be called

on to help in situations like this. Maybe that is something we need to consider – training some of our members to be conflict resolution experts.

Jesus says that if this step fails, then and only then should the conflict come to light in the larger church. But it should not come to light in order for it to be talked about behind people's backs; it should only come to light in order for reconciliation to be found. This is probably the step we are most uncomfortable with. It's simply not something we modern liberal people and reticent Midwesterners are very good at. But there are excellent and healthy examples from throughout Christian history of how this works. It only works well in close communities where trust and intimacy have already been cultivated.

You may think that the final step in this process Jesus describes is harsh. Could it be that you would actually have a situation where you would remove people from the fellowship of the church? I've actually encountered a few of those in my time in ministry. They are extreme cases where someone is unwilling to be reconciled to fellow church members and that becomes a cancer eating away at the community and its ministries.

But there is something I want you to notice, a nuanced detail in this verse. Jesus says to treat such people as "a Gentile and a tax collector." Think for a moment what that means. *How did Jesus treat tax collectors and Gentiles?* Jesus hung out with tax collectors. He said that Gentiles and tax collectors were to be welcomed into the family of God. Jesus said that these were the people to whom we were to preach the gospel.

So, Jesus doesn't let us off the hook. If we reach the extreme circumstance of asking someone to leave the church, then we are to welcome them, spend time with them, and minister to them just like we welcome, spend time with, and minister to all those who are not members. They become potential members, candidates for evangelization.

Finally, Jesus tells us that he is with us in this process. Where even two or three are gathered together striving to embody the practices of forgiveness and reconciliation, Jesus is there.

Friends, what Jesus calls us to here in Matthew 18 isn't easy, but it is one of the few places where what Jesus expects of the church is expressly laid out. In order for us to be the church—living the life of the cross, assailing the powers of the hell, shining as the light of the world, being transformed into the Body of Christ—then we've got to start by learning how to practice forgiveness and reconciliation with each other.

There is a treaty we can sign. There is an opportunity for reconciliation. Thanks be to God.