

Third Sunday in Lent
James 5:13–18

March 12, 2023
Matthew 5:21–26

On the Journey to Reconciliation

1. Tracy and I have been rewatching the original episodes of a 1990's TV series we loved to watch when we were newly married: *Mad About You* with Paul Reiser and Helen Hunt, who play Paul and Jamie Buckman, themselves newlyweds.
 - a. In one episode Paul's cousin is trying to get him to invest in a new technology: Virtual Reality.
 - i. Paul tries out an early model of virtual reality goggles where he could experience any number of things: skydiving, riding a roller coaster, walking on the moon, etc.
 - ii. What does he choose?
 - iii. Meeting model Christy Brinkley (remember, this is the early 90s) meeting her at the beach and rubbing sunblock on her back. Right.
 - iv. Meanwhile, Paul's wife Jamie gets super mad at Paul because he chose to invest their money on the Virtual Reality start up without talking it over with her.
 - v. Paul refuses to admit he was wrong in making the investment without talking it over.
 - vi. What's more, he lets it slip that his Virtual Reality fantasy had been with Christy Brinkley. That didn't help matters.
 - vii. Eventually Paul convinces Jamie to at least try the virtual reality headset before passing judgement, and she reluctantly agrees to use it.
 - viii. Do you know what her fantasy was?
 1. It did briefly involve meeting Andre Agassi, the tennis player whose blond hair came down to his shoulders (again, remember, early 90s),
 2. but actually then her fantasy switches to Paul, her husband. Weird, right?
 3. Well, it all makes sense when the fantasy plays out. In her Virtual Reality experience, Jamie gets to hear Paul do something that he so rarely did.
 4. Paul keeps admitting that he was wrong.
 - a. I was wrong wrong wrong. So wrong.
2. Today's passage comes from the Sermon on the Mount, a gathering of teachings of Jesus.
 - a. This specific passage comes right after the Beatitudes (Blessed are the meek, the peacemakers...)
 - i. In our passage Jesus starts with what would become a theme in this and following verses: You've heard it said... but I say to you...

- ii. He goes on: You've heard it said don't do this. I say to you, don't even THINK about it.
- iii. That's a much tougher standard!
 - 1. I can say I haven't murdered anyone, but can I really say I haven't wished someone dead?
 - 2. Or been unmoved as armies representing me kill enemies of the state?
 - 3. For that matter, as Jesus teaches, can I really say I haven't called someone a fool (or worse) under my breath?
 - 4. Clearly, not one of us can claim innocence there.
 - 5. Incidentally, the phrase "hell fire" is a reference to "*Gehenna*" or "*Gehenna of fire*". This was originally the valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, where [trash] and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1067/kjv/tr/0-1/>
 - a. In other words, you belong in a burning trash heap if that's how you're going to deal with your neighbor.
- b. And Jesus says: if you're on the way to worship (specifically to make an offering at the temple), and you realize YOU have offended someone, go clear that up first.
 - i. Let me stop here a moment to point out a pattern of self-awareness.
 - ii. These verses have been about our acknowledging even of secretly cursing someone out, being fully aware that our actions have harmed someone.
 - iii. And then what Jesus is saying is : go take care of it. Be reconciled. *to change thoroughly, i.e. (mentally) to conciliate* <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1259/kjv/tr/0-1/>
- c. I think the implication here is that the justice system had been originally set up to require the person who was wronged to accuse the one who had hurt them.
 - i. And there were structures to seek justice, a court system.
 - ii. So basically the idea was the injured party brought a case against the offender, and the courts offered justice.
 - iii. But Jesus is saying: let the weight of stepping forward be on the offender to recognize in themselves the harm they've caused.
 - iv. And let them take the opportunity to seek a reconciliation with the person harmed.
 - v. Picture someone who has wronged you, seriously harmed you, coming to you and asking for forgiveness, instead of you having to confront that person.
- d. Scholar Wilda Gafney writes: *Jesus's description of reconciliation puts the [responsibility] on the one who knows someone has something against them, the one who wronged or is accused of wrong, rather than the one who has been done wrong. This can be read as a disruption of a power curve: It is not up to a*

victim to demand justice, nor should it be, rather the moral imperative belongs to the one accused of wrong. Unfortunately, this is not the paradigm the church uses in responding to those whom it has injured, particularly marginalized communities [like]: LGBTQI persons Gafney, Wilda C.. *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church* (p. 171). Church Publishing Incorporated. Kindle Edition.

3. What's more, the purpose here is to seek reconciliation, the reestablishment of relationship.
 - a. That's the message of the passage from James.
 - b. Only there it uses the language of healing, which I would assume has emotional as well as physical dimensions.
 - c. The writer of James proposes that people pray for each other. But importantly it also asks that we confess our sins to one another.
 - i. That seems like a big ask.
 - ii. And yet, if you think about it, it reflects a trusting environment.
 - iii. An opportunity to say: I really messed up here or there.
 - iv. And there isn't an expectation of judgement or conflict, rather, it is an expectation that it brings healing.
 - v. Imagine how powerful it would be to hear a boss or a parent say: yeah, I made a mistake there. Or : I shouldn't have said such and such – that was out of line. I'm sorry (speaking to God, but also to one another)
4. We think of Lent as a time to ask forgiveness of God. And that is right. We seek to be reconciled to God, a God who is gracious and eager to welcome us back.
 - a. But we're also here talking about asking one another for forgiveness, fessing up to the things which separate us from one another, working to right wrongs proactively, rather than when we're brought up on charges in court, etc.
 - b. And the call is not out of shame or blame: It's out of seeking reconciliation, out of a concern for healing.
 - c. We as a congregation have a history of thinking about reconciliation.
 - i. In particular, the church has worked against racism and discrimination for several decades.
 - ii. For those of you who may not know the story, Dr. William Laws, pastor of this congregation for nearly 30 all the way up to the early 1970s, worked together with J. Irwin Miller, CEO of Cummins, to combat systemic racism, in particular the practice of discriminating against potential black home owners or renters.
 - iii. The idea was to work towards the healing at a local level for the systemic injury of racism which dates back for such a long time in our history as a country.
 - iv. We also were part of the conversation during the expansion of the Human Rights Ordinance to include amendments to the city's human rights ordinance, adding gender identity and sexual orientation

- v. again the purpose of working towards reconciliation and healing, to grow slowly levels of trust and community bonds so all people would truly feel safe, valued and respected.
5. Today's passages call us to a self-awareness as individuals and as a community which seeks reconciliation and healing.
- a. This isn't about punishing or shaming, but rather about our journey as individuals to call ourselves out, and to seek out those whom we've harmed by our actions or our conscious inaction.
 - b. I imagine we each have plenty to think about there.
 - c. And I imagine that we could readily create a list of those who've wronged us. In a community of believers where we seek to be open with one another and we seek the wellbeing of the community, my prayer would be that no matter which direction the harm went (whether we harmed or were harmed) that we could trust each other enough to be vulnerable and honest with each other to repair and strength relationships with each other.

Reflection questions

1. Share a story of recognizing you had wronged someone and then you went to them to seek reconciliation.
2. What do you think Jesus is trying to accomplish in Matthew 5:21-26 when he says "you've heard it said... but I say to you..."? Why?
3. If I say "I'm not racist / I didn't own slaves" but it occurs to me that I have benefitted from structural racism that gave me a distinct advantage over people who were discriminated, how do I go about working for reconciliation with those who were harmed by the very system I benefitted from? Or is that not my problem?

Sources

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-521-37>

<https://www.indystar.com/story/news/2015/09/15/columbus-adds-sexual-orientation-human-rights-ordinance/72348220/>