

Matthew 5:21-26

The 6th Sunday of Epiphany

What are you waiting for?

Roy W. Howard

In this section of his sermon on the mount, Jesus is showing ways to mend what is fractured. In each of four sections something is out of alignment with the life God intends for all people. Jesus doesn't say precisely how to do the mending, he just says do it. Frankly, that's a challenge. And then he lifts up all the horrible possible consequences of not mending what is broken.

Here is what I think is important to remember: the purpose of the law that Jesus is upholding is to bring us into the right relationships that bring delight to God and our lives. The Law may indeed remind us of our failures. But the Law is also a gift from God as John Calvin taught. Calvin said the Law is grace. It is a lamp unto our feet and a guide for our lives when we are out of whack. For instance when I am estranged from someone and avoiding taking the next move to make amends - be it with my wife, children, colleagues or church members or neighbors - nothing else in my life is quite in tune. There is an unhappy dissonance in my spirit. Do you know what I mean? The Law is a gift to bring us in tune with God and others.

Jesus says, if you are going to offer your gifts to God, first make amends with your brother or sister, then come to God with joy and thanksgiving to offer your gift.

I recall being in an intense conflict with another person. The circumstances and subject don't matter as much as the pain that I was experiencing. The best I can describe my heart is like a gun-shy dog who winches whenever there is loud sound. That's the way I felt when this person who had left me in this condition approached me at a dinner party. I could sense my whimpering dog self go into motion as I waited for the next comment. But what occurred was an apology and hand reaching offered to shake mine. My dog self lit up with joy.

This is what reconciliation looks like. Someone has to take the first move; it wasn't me. But I learned so much from that encounter that healed my heart even as it healed our fractured relationship. I wish it had been me to move first but I simply couldn't summon up the belief or the courage. It required more vulnerability than I had in my well at the time. He made the next move and that made all the difference.

There is a moment in the liturgy when we enact such a ritual of reconciliation. It's called the *passing of the peace*. For many of us it is the high point of the service. Having confessed that we have fallen short, we receive the astonishing good news that God in Jesus Christ loves us and has forgiven us. The Lamb of God has taken away our sins. But there is one more gesture that completes the movement. It's when we offer our neighbor the peace of Christ. This is not a moment for saying: "hi, have a nice day." It's the moment when we declare that we are reconciled not only with God but with one another. It's an opportunity for "the next move."

Worship is the safe space to **practice** making amends, being reconciled; it's the Church's way of being vulnerable with one another because God has been vulnerable with us. Try it here. Then try it a work. Then try it in the most intimate place of all - your home. This is how God in Jesus Christ has chosen the path of reconciliation with all us.

Nelson Mandela, of blessed memory, famously teamed up with Bishop Tutu to form truth and reconciliation forums throughout South Africa in an effort to heal the country and avoid the bloodbath so typical of revolutionary change. It may be the only time in which a central practice of Christianity was put to the test in such a public way on such a massive social scale. To the surprise of nearly everyone, it worked. It's still working. Oppressors met oppressed. Confessions were made. Tears were shed. Amends were made. Heads were *not* sliced off. Hands were *not* severed. People estranged from one another actually embraced in reconciliation. Did everyone; of course not. Is everything perfect; of course not. But that is no reason to avoid doing what is right.

I think it's exactly the kind of leadership that is missing in our divided country right now. Can you imagine truth and reconciliation commissions set up in local communities across the country? That requires courageous leadership, precisely what this country needs right now.

There is something quite wonderful as being at peace with God and neighbor. Am I right? Wouldn't you rather be in harmony with God and neighbor?

What are you waiting for? Is there a next move you need to make?

In her marvelous book, *Daring Greatly*, Brene Brown describes how shame undercuts nearly every path to joy and peace in our lives. It is shame that keeps us from daring greatly, from living the fullness of life that has been given us in Christ. I believe it is also shame that keeps us from making the scary step reconciling with those who have hurt us. The antidote to shame, she argues, is vulnerability. The courage to be vulnerable is the path to reconciliation. Brown says, "Only when we're brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of light." Darkness includes the broken relationships in our lives.

This is precisely that way that God takes with us, entering into the darkness of humanity, our darkness, becoming vulnerable in our savior Jesus Christ. **God loves us enough to risk everything for us.** Is there a next move you need to make?

Remember: in our baptism we are named the beloved of God. This is the truth that allows us to make peace with our neighbor, be reconciled and lay our gifts before God with joy.

Is there a next move in your life?

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

