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Matthew 5:21-37
Reconciliation

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us this morning, in Christ Jesus we pray, Amen.

On the bulletin cover is a photograph of a sculpture called “Hands Across the Divide.” It was unveiled in Derry, Northern Ireland in 1992, 20 years after Bloody Sunday. When observing this sculpture, perspective is everything; depending on where you’re standing, the figures look closer together or farther apart, always with the arms stretched out toward each other, longing for connection . . . connection is our natural state in relationship; it’s like the connection between 2 magnets, the bond is strong, but if it is broken and one of the poles gets flipped around, there is a force pushing them apart.

Jesus gives a number of examples from his own context of ways human connection is broken, and with the kind of magnetic pole flipped around, how important it is to try and resolve the tension. Now, this whole passage

begs the reminder that we don’t need to take scripture literally . . . but we do want to take it seriously. When we read through the text it seems like Jesus is telling us not to have human emotions, but if you contextualize it a bit, the issue is more about preventing the consequences of anger that is unchecked. Murder is obviously not welcome in the kingdom of God, so observe your anger and address its source. In Jesus’ own context, perhaps he was warning against those who might pick up arms and join the Zealots in their desire to fight the overwhelmingly powerful Romans. It’s just a recipe for disaster.

Things like adultery and divorce are high on Jesus’ list of things that break connection, because their culture gave no status to women, and yet some men still treated them as disposable. While it is not possible to control what pops into one’s mind; it is possible to control the subjects on which one meditates.¹ Again, it’s not thoughts themselves, but thoughts that are unchecked, that lead to behaviour that breaks connection and

¹ Feasting on the Word. Year A Vol 1 p. 361

marginalizes others. In my reading of the text, Jesus' speech all comes down to self-responsibility in our thoughts, our intentions, and our actions. We are responsible for ourselves always; we are called to be true to ourselves, true to others, true to God, particularly when the dignity of others is involved.

Right in the middle of the text here, Jesus makes this hyperbolic statement about cutting off parts of the body to keep one's self from sinning. If I wanted to get people's attention and make them listen to something important, I might speak this way too. Those around us are vulnerable to our negative behaviour . . . and brokenness has a profound impact on people's lives. And we're human; we make mistakes; we learn and grow; life gives us plenty of opportunity to learn how to reconcile.

Jesus basically says here, go and have a conversation with them. Try and work it out. Regardless of who wronged who, if you're aware of the conflict, approach the other person and try to be reconciled. Well, what if

they don't listen? As it happens, later on in Matthew, the 18th chapter, Jesus says this:

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Again, he says have a conversation. If it doesn't work to do it one on one, reach out for support. The text is silent on how to have these kinds of conversations; maybe in Jesus' day, everyone knew how to have them. Who knows. We're a bit of a conflict avoidant culture . . . because it's scary and hard . . . because it's risky and it feels like there is something between us pushing us apart, so we have to have courage to address that tension. I was on a church staff years ago that read a book together called Crucial Conversations. It's one of these models that help us be self-

responsible, know what our objective is, and have the conversation without doing more harm. Other examples include the Nonviolent Communication model, which breaks down our perception of the other, our interpretation, our feelings, and so on. It encourages “I” statements that communicate our own experience and truth without blaming. It’s similar to what the Haven teaches. In my experience having conversations is less scary when we have some tools. Ben & Jock at the Haven used to say, doing any part of the communication model is better than doing none of it.

Here in our worship service there are a few things we do that are important to reconciliation . . . I want to talk about 2 of them. I know people are resistant to the passing of the peace; I never liked it when I regularly sat in a pew; it’s awkward and disruptive. But it’s also symbolic of life. Reconciliation is messy, and life giving. After a minute of sharing the peace, sometimes it’s hard to get you all to sit down again. Yes, it’s disruptive, and it is a reminder each week to

be reconciled. There was a woman in a previous church I served with whom I had a conflict. And every week I could, I passed the peace with her, to give us a place of positive interaction, and to remind myself that this isn’t going away. Reconciliation takes time and courage and probably timing.

Another thing we do in worship that is important to reconciliation is Eucharist, which has been a point of tension and if we’re honest, is still a growing edge for us. Bishop John Robinson defined the practice of the Eucharist as simply “making holy that which is common.” We offer to God the totality of our lives – the darkness and the light – and it is blessed and made holy; it is symbolized in the gifts of bread and wine, the fruits of human work, and returned to us as the presence of the living Christ. We take it into our bodies and it works in us and through us, eventually making reconciliation possible.²

Life and relationships are a struggle . . . and help is available to us . . . here in the sacraments, in God’s presence with us, in a

² Feasting on the Word. Year A Vol 1 p. 358

church of people who are committed to supporting and encouraging each other in this very challenging work. It's worth it for the joy of bringing that relationship or part of ourselves back into wholeness. It is worth it for the lightness we feel and the clarity and fullness with which we can approach God in worship. Thanks be to God.