

CLOSE GAPS

Working for Reconciliation | The Other Six (Part 4)

Text: Matthew 5:21-26; 18:15-17; Luke 12:57-59

The Work of the Carpenter

The story is told of two brothers who lived on adjoining farms, tilling their land side-by-side, sharing machinery, and trading goods and labor as needed.

One day, however, the long collaboration broke apart. It began with a small misunderstanding but grew into a major difference. It finally exploded into a mutual volley of bitter words followed by silence and separation.

One morning, a rap came on the elder brother's door. On the other side stood a man carrying a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for work," he said. "Perhaps you have a job I could help with?"

The brother thought for a moment and then replied: "Why, yes. I do. You see that farm across the creek? That's my enemy. There used to be a little meadow between us, but some time ago he took a bulldozer to the river levee and made that creek there between us. He did that to spite me, but I'm going to do him one better. I want you to take that pile of lumber over by the barn and build me a fence with it. I want an 8-foot fence so I won't ever have to look at his place or see his face again.

"I think I understand," the carpenter replied, "Point me to the nails and the post-hole digger and I'll supply your need." With that, the farmer helped the laborer get the materials ready, then headed off to town for the day.

It was about sunset when the farmer returned to find that the carpenter was nearly done with his job. To the farmer's utter shock, he found that the carpenter hadn't built a fence with his lumber at all. Instead, he'd constructed a bridge -- stretching from one side of the creek to the other! Across the span walked his younger brother, with hand outstretched. "How amazing you are to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers met in the middle, once again taking each other's hand.

Hearing a clatter, they turned to see the carpenter hoisting his toolbox. The brothers entreated him to stay. "No, I must move

on," he said with a smile. "There are so many more bridges to build." And he was off with a wave.

The Way of Jesus

Long ago, another carpenter made this observation: **"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'** But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' – which (in nearest translation) means "you worthless spit-wad" – **"is answerable to the Sanhedrin"** (Matt 5:21-22). In other words, if you make a habit of working out your issues with other people by talking badly to them or badly about them, others are going to judge you for this. Responsible people ought to challenge you on this behavior because it helps no one.

"But" that's not even close to your biggest risk, says the Carpenter. I tell you that **"anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell"** (Matt 5:22). In other words, if your usual way of handling grievances is to say, "Fuey with you. I write you off," don't think that is harmless. You are actually in danger of letting hell into your heart, because hell is all about hatred and the breaking off of relationships.

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar" (Matt 5:23-24). In other words, recognize that fixing broken relationships is more important to God than the rituals of religion. So, **"first go and BE RECONCILED to your brother [or sister]; then come and offer your gift"** (Matt 5:21-24).

Jesus underlines further: **"Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court"** (Matt 5:25). In fact, **"As you are going with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to BE RECONCILED to him on the way."**

Why? Because as bad as things are between you and that other person right now, it could get a whole lot worse. **"He may drag you off to the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny"** (Luke 12:58-59).

Ask anyone who's ever had a family, friend or work- relationship really go south, and they'll tell you: "I wish I'd dealt with

the issues early." Broken relationships have this pattern of escalating damage or of leaving people with terrible regrets. With some exceptions, it is better to invest in building not a fence but a bridge.

God Works Hard at Reconciliation

This is what God does, doesn't he? Of all beings in the Universe, is there anyone who could have more rightly written the relationship off with certain people than God? I mean, think about it: He gave us everything. He asked almost nothing of humanity, except that we love him and love our neighbors. He gave human beings everything and asked nothing of us, except that which would actually be in our own best interests.

But when humanity rejected him and his way... When we wronged God profoundly...

When every natural sensibility would have been to erect a fence so long and high that human beings would be left forever on their own and God would be spared any further insult or injury from them... God did something stunningly supernatural instead. He took the lumber we gave him, a cross actually, and used it to build a bridge between himself and humanity.

Here's the big THEOLOGICAL IDEA I want to stress today. **God works really hard at closing gaps.** He does not stand on his pride, but humbles himself, taking the form of a servant. He exercises great patience and perseverance. He travels long distances. He endures great pain. He risks further rejection. God works really hard at redeeming relationships because life-changing love is the most important thing on his agenda.

To put it another way, **our Father in heaven is a peacemaker.** Note that I didn't say "peacekeeper." God isn't interested in just keeping things peaceful, as in "peace and quiet." There are plenty of homes, workplaces, or communities that look peaceful where an actual cold war is going on and fences are high. God doesn't want to keep false peace; he wants to make real peace.

Real peace doesn't get made without confronting painful issues and naming stubborn sins. It doesn't happen without honest confession and genuine repentance and risky forgiveness. Reconciliation almost always requires a daring sacrifice of every understandable impulse to put up or keep up a fence. But God works hard at this.

God Wants Us to Work Hard at Reconciliation Too

And that leads us to the big PRACTICAL IDEA I pray you'll take home with you today: Because HE does it, God wants us to work hard at closing gaps too. I love the way 2 Corinthians 5:19 puts these theological and practical ideas together: "In Christ... God was reconciling the world to himself... not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation."

How committed are YOU to the message and work of reconciliation in your relationships? When was the last time you really worked hard to restore a broken one?

Sometimes the reason we don't do it, or don't do it more often, is because we're not sure HOW. Let's face it, relational peacemaking, can be as complicated a work of engineering as physical bridge-building is. If you are looking for a manual to help you with this, let me suggest a resource I've recommended once before. Pick up a copy of Ken Sande's marvelously practical book, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide for Resolving Personal Conflict*. Ken Sande will give you far more step-by-step instruction than we have time to go into today.

My purpose today, however, isn't to go into all the "how's" of reconciliation. As our church's **Discipleship Vision** says, before we'll ever make a serious investment in following Jesus, we have to develop the intention to do so. My simple goal today is to motivate you to say: "I'm going to go after it. I'm going to pursue reconciliation with that person across that creek." Every time you work hard at trying to establish a real peace between you and someone from whom you are separated by misunderstanding, ignorance, injustice, or conflict, you show yourself to be a child of your Heavenly Father. **"Blessed are the peacemakers,"** said Jesus, **"for they will be called sons of God"** (Matt 5:9).

Few servants of Christ understood this biblical vision better, worked harder to share it, or sacrificed more to advance it than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. For all his acknowledged humanity, Dr. King saw with divine clarity how crucial it is that all of us work very hard to build bridges across whatever creeks our sin has dug between us.

"In a real sense," he once wrote, **"all life is interrelated. All [of us] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what**

you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.. If we do not learn to live together as friends, we will die apart as fools."

Jesus said much the same thing:

- You shall love the Lord your God with all that you are*
- and you shall love your neighbor as if he was yourself.*
- Everything hangs upon this (Matt 22:37-40, paraphrased).*

A Personal Challenge

In light of this, you and I are presented with a serious challenge, aren't we? I mean the work of reconciliation is so central to the message and mission of Jesus that it ought to disturb us if it isn't also central to us. If we can't point to at least one place where we are in the process of building a bridge toward someone, even though the natural impulse is, "Make the fence higher and wider," can we really say we are following Jesus?

*With whom are YOU going to be a gap-closer this week? Is there someone in your family or field of former friends from whom you are separated by a river of sin or pain? Is there someone in your workplace or school, your church or neighborhood, who **"has something against you"** or you against them? Is there someone of a different race, politics, or preference sitting or living near you but across a great divide?*

There are so many divisions today. People have grown so accustomed to spite and spitting, to suing and sealing themselves off from others. But Jesus says: Don't let hell have your heart like this. Don't think sitting here in the Temple is pleasing to God if out there you've put up a fence against your brother or your sister. Pursue reconciliation. Work like God himself modeled when he lay on lumber to provide a bridge. For why should we die apart as fools when, by the grace of God, we might yet learn to live together as friends?

Closing a gap is one of the things we are meant to do with THE OTHER SIX.

Please pray with me...