



## “Can We Be Reconciled?: The Power of An Apology”

Matthew 5:23-24

November 15, 2020

Jesus was serious about worship. As a young boy, he wandered away from his parents, not to go see a movie or meet up with friends, but to go to the Temple. Throughout his preaching ministry, Jesus spoke with passion and intention about the centrality of worship to all who would follow him. Luke’s Gospel tells us that it was his custom to worship in his local synagogue each Sabbath. Jesus was serious about worship. Of course, Jesus also taught that the worship of God is possible anywhere and encouraged everywhere. He told the woman at the well in John’s Gospel that the location of our worship matters far less than its content—“God is Spirit and those who worship God do so in spirit and in truth.” Jesus was serious about worship, that time when we humble ourselves in reverence and praise when we listen for God’s voice and quiet the cacophony of competing claims.

This morning’s few verses from Matthew’s Gospel are striking because we know how serious Jesus was about worship. Here Jesus is speaking to his disciples in the message we call the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon is filled with teachings that have come to define Christian living—blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the hungry, the meek, the merciful, let your light shine before others, love your enemies, forgive as you have been forgiven. Just before the verses I read this morning, Jesus speaks to the disciples about the spiritual danger of anger and resentment. And then, he gives a real-life example. If you are at the altar, the sacred place, the place of worship, and you remember that someone has something against you, leave immediately and be reconciled before returning to worship.

We know that Jesus spoke in parables and metaphors, used hyperbole to bring greater clarity to his message and resonance with his audience. But I would suggest to you that this passage from the Sermon on the Mount is no exaggeration, nor is it hyperbolic. Instead, I am convinced

that these instructions from Jesus have deep practical and personal meaning for the lives of his disciples.

Here it is. Reconciliation is a prerequisite for the worship of God. Interpersonal peace precedes proper praise.

I would assume it’s noncontroversial to observe that “I’m sorry” is among the most difficult phrases for many of us to speak. The words don’t come easily, especially when we are so practiced at justifying our actions, demonizing our opponents, holding our grudges. A friend pointed out to me recently how appropriate it is that we speak of “nursing” our resentments. We often treat our bitterness with far more care than our joy. We can find so many reasons not to apologize or reconcile, and many of them make good sense or are at least defensible in our own minds.

And then, Jesus says, we come to worship. We find ourselves in the presence of God without protective piety, vulnerable, and fully present. And here is what happens. We remember. Worship evokes memory in a way nothing else can. We recall words spoken in anger earlier in the week. We summon up an act of inappropriate aggression toward a stranger. We cringe at a Facebook comment that, in the moment, we viewed as a brilliant takedown of some lesser viewpoint. We regret the silent treatment toward our spouse or the quick temper toward our children. Here, we remember.

As is often the case, Fred Craddock said it best, “Memory is a powerful stab of awakening to face our duty. If you’re at the altar and you’re offering your gift and then you remember, leave it and go...it’s urgent. Do it immediately. Don’t wait; delay is deadly. It will fester. Trifles light as air will become proofs as strong as Holy Writ and you will find yourself in a daily ritual of going into the backyard and lifting the stone to make sure the snake is still there. That it is now defining your life. Don’t let that happen. Go first. There is something that

takes precedence over prayer and that's my relationship to you."<sup>i</sup>

Beloved, I know this to be true and I believe that you do as well. Resentment is a prison we construct ourselves. Reconciliation is freedom. Confession is the key. When we offer a genuine and unconditional apology, we unlock the door and open the way to genuine worship of God and relationship with one another.

I do mean, and I believe Jesus did mean a genuine apology. We know the other kind as well. *I'm sorry if you really were offended by that. I'm sorry that you're so sensitive.* Or just about any apology that begins, I'm sorry, but... It's not hard to see how complicated these acts of apology are for we proud and stubborn human beings.

But when we are at the altar, when we are before God's righteous judgment and compassionate grace, we see our own failings in the light of divine mercy. We acknowledge our frailty and limitation. We commit to another way.

I wanted to preach on reconciliation these two Sundays after a bitter campaign ended with an election that revealed the depth of our division. I wanted to speak to you about reconciliation because it is the path forward that God prescribes for us, both collectively and as individuals. It is the way toward truth and life. And it is not easy—not ever and especially not now. I see and hear so many in our time whose resentment has become a raging fire that threatens to absolutely consume them. Some refuse to acknowledge the hurts they have caused. Others promise to exact revenge for past wounds. And so the cycle of abusive rhetoric and victimization continues. What can possibly stop it? Come to the altar. Remember. Go and be reconciled. Then, only then, return to worship.

This is the example that we as people of faith can set for the world around us. We know the truth of what Sen. Alan Simpson observed at the funeral for President George H.W. Bush two years ago. Simpson said, "He never hated anyone. He knew what his mother and my mother always knew: Hatred corrodes the container it's carried in." We've seen enough corrosion to know there is a better way. We can choose it beginning today.

I have lamented from this pulpit before the extreme incivility and even hatred that have come to characterize public discourse and personal interactions in our time and place. In just this context, imagine the power and possibility of true forgiveness. Imagine the gift of honest confession and the freedom of release from guilt and shame, and the release of a grudge held far too long, rotting our souls and isolating us from one another. Forgiveness is indeed freedom. Do you remember the healing that you felt when one dear to you spoke those powerful words: "I forgive you"? Perhaps there is someone whom you have been struggling to forgive, or whose forgiveness you long to receive. My counsel is this: don't wait. This week, even this day, seek them out and be reconciled to one another. Embrace the power of forgiveness.

A couple of years ago I was rushing to the grocery store to pick something up on the way home from the office. I was late, in a hurry, and my gas gauge was below empty. Of course, the parking lot was crowded. After one sweep through the lot, I spotted an empty place near the door. Relieved, I turned right and pulled into the spot. As I got out of the car, I both saw and heard, for the first time, another driver, who had clearly arrived before me and had her left turn signal on, planning to pull into that same spot. The other driver was irate. She honked, gestured, then put down her window and began to yell as she pulled into a spot farther down the row. I froze in the parking lot trying to decide what to do next. I was in a hurry, and the issue was irrelevant at that point, so I took two steps toward the store. But something made me stop. I turned around and walked up to the driver, who was getting out of her car. "I'm very sorry. I was in a hurry. I didn't see you. I should have been paying attention."

I braced myself for her reaction. The woman looked at the ground. "It's not you. I'm just exhausted. I'm sorry for blowing up." When she looked up, I saw tears in her eyes. We walked together toward the store and laughed about how badly we both wanted the closest spot. As we turned separate ways at the entrance, the woman said. "Thank you for speaking to me. Thank you for apologizing. It really turned my day around." A key turned in the lock. We saw each other, for just a

moment, as two flawed and frayed human beings doing the best we could. A tiny act of reconciliation that I'll always remember.

Confession. Forgiveness. A gift from God. A call to follow. A practice that might yet save us from ourselves and call us to the better angels of our nature.

If you are at the altar and you remember...well, you know what to do. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.