

The Reconciling Community

Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-17

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

February 28, 2021

We have before us two teachings of Jesus, each dealing with forgiveness. But the situations are quite different, and they present us with different issues. I dare say that each issue will make us uncomfortable. Let's begin with the teaching from the Sermon on the Mount.

Last week I referred to Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, rabbi at the Central Synagogue in New York City. I said that she is one of the most insightful and impressive preachers I have heard. The sermon I referenced was her Yom Kippur sermon from 2016. It is titled, "Forgiveness is a prayer," in case you are interested in finding it on-line, which I encourage you to do.

In her sermon Rabbi Buchdahl talked about Chuck Colson, whom many of you will remember as the first of Richard Nixon's associates to be convicted and sent to prison. While in prison, Colson became a born again Christian and started a prison ministry.

In an interview on "60 Minutes," Colson was asked if he had ever thought about apologizing to all the people he had hurt. He replied, "No, I've made peace with God in my heart."

Rabbi Buchdahl said, "For Jews, making peace in your heart, even with God, is not enough." She explained, "(If your sin) is between you and God, and you have come here (to the synagogue) today (Yom Kippur) needing to atone for that – you're good. . . (But if your sin) is between you and another person, then being here and pounding your chest and praying hard, well – it's not enough. Jewish law instructs us that it is only in a personal encounter with the one we have hurt that we can truly repent."

Rabbi Buchdahl's sermon was in the back of my mind when I turned to our text: "*So, when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*"

That verse and Rabbi Buchdahl's sermon flowed together in my mind, intermingling, and I thought, "Boy, Jesus really sounds Jewish!" Or maybe I should have thought, "Boy, Rabbi Buchdahl sounds a lot like Jesus."

"Making peace in your heart, even with God, is not enough." "*Be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*" The rabbi and the Rabbi – both being Jews – appear to be on the same wavelength. Except that whereas Rabbi Buchdahl said making peace with God without making peace with those we have hurt isn't enough, Jesus seems to say it isn't even possible.

"If your brother or sister – your fellow member in the community – has something against you," Jesus said, "do not go to the temple. Get right with the one who has something against you, then go worship God."

Translated into religious forms of today, Jesus said, "If you're on your way to church – may the day come soon -- to worship God, to teach your class or to hear the Word taught and preached, to pray and sing the hymns of faith, to find respite for your

soul in the midst of the craziness of our world, and en route you are thinking about your neighbor who is angry with you for what you said or did, and when you think about it, your stomach begins to churn, and you begin to think some pretty negative things about your neighbor, forget about going to church. Forget about worshipping God. First, get right with your neighbor. Then come back to church.”

The spiritual logic seems to be: You can't worship God in spirit and in truth when your soul's a mess. Your feelings of bitterness and animosity will invariably infect your relationship with God.

Christians – which is to say, Gentile followers of the Jewish Jesus – are inclined to reverse the order that Jesus taught. Perhaps because it is easier to confess our sin to God, whom we haven't seen, than to a flesh and blood person who is standing right in front of us.

The result is that “making peace with God” or “getting right with God,” is often seen as a substitute for doing the hard work of reconciling with ones we have sinned against or who have sinned against us. That seems to be what Chuck Colson was doing.

“I have made my peace with God,” Colson said. Really? Have we really made peace with God? Can we be at peace with God if we are bitter, if we refuse to forgive? Scripture says otherwise. *“Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (I John 4:20-21)*

It is the clear teaching of Jesus – though it might sound counter-intuitive to us – that the way to God is made impassible by our sin against others and by our unwillingness to forgive their sin against us. Stated positively: Forgiving others and being forgiven by them opens the pathway to God. (Which may be a different way of saying, *“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”*)

The second passage presents us with a different situation and a different set of issues. Whereas in the first passage Jesus presents us with a situation in which someone has something against us, i.e., we have hurt someone, in the second passage he presents us with a situation in which someone in the church has hurt us.

His teaching in this regard, which we will get to in a moment, did not come out of nowhere. We know the disciples didn't always get along, because the Gospels tell us about one such incident. One day two of the disciples got into an argument about who would be given the places of honor when Christ came into his kingdom. Mark doesn't tell us who the two disciples were. But Matthew names names; he said it was James and John. You remember that they were brothers. A little sibling rivalry perhaps. Actually, Matthew makes it worse. He said it wasn't James and John who argued about it; their mother went to Jesus and asked on their behalf. You can imagine James and John, humiliated, their heads down, hands to their foreheads, saying, “Oh mom, c'mon.” Jesus of course refused to entertain the idea. Then all the other disciples got mad at James and John.

Jesus recognized that there needed to be a procedure in place for settling arguments. He outlined a three-step process. If someone has hurt you, go to that person and try to work things out. Go to that person. Not to a bunch of other people in the congregation. Go to the one who hurt you. Remember Rabbi Buchdahl's admonition: “. . . it is only in a personal encounter with the one we have hurt that we can truly repent.”

If that person isn't cooperative, go back a second time, but this time bring a couple of people with you. Why? Because there need to be independent witnesses, so that there will be no he said/he said/she said later. Important to notice: that is what was required in Jewish law. Remember that a minor theme in this sermon is the Jewishness of Jesus.

If that person is still not open to reconciliation, take the matter to the church. This is where we would likely say, Whoa! Are you serious? How exactly does that work?

Well, Jesus didn't offer specifics. He was making the point that the congregation has a stake in the relationships between its members, partly because it is or should be concerned about the people involved and partly because of the way interpersonal conflicts can spill over into the life of the congregation.

We don't need Jesus to tell us that, do we? I've never been a member of a church where that wasn't an issue. Word gets around through the congregational grapevine that So-and-So and So-and-So aren't speaking to one another. So-and-So's friends gather around him/her, and So-and-So's friends form a defensive ring around him/her. Tension begins to develop between the two groups. Pretty soon someone drops out of the choir. And the poor Committee on Committees. They have to factor in who's on whose side when making committee assignments. You wouldn't So-and-So and So-and-So to be together on the fellowship committee, for crying out loud. That could be a disaster.

This is not the kind of teaching we expect from Jesus, is it? There are no lofty insights into the nature of God here. "*God makes his sun shine on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*" There is no provocative story about a son who leaves home and wastes his inheritance and comes back in shame only to be received graciously by his father. There are no challenging ethical standards: "*Be perfect even as God is perfect.*"

This is just nuts and bolts stuff. It's how to live in community with other believers stuff. How to get along with each other in three not so easy steps.

You might say that this just shows that Jesus had a practical side. But more importantly it is a measure of how deeply he valued the community of faith and how dependent he was on the church.

A generation later Paul wrote Jesus "*came and proclaimed peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near.*" (Ephesians 2:17) He has "*broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between (Jews and Gentiles).*" (Ephesians 2:14). His aim was a "*new creation.*" His method was reconciliation.

Jesus bequeathed his ministry to the church. Paul wrote that the God who "*reconciled us to himself through Christ has now given us a ministry of reconciliation.*" (II Corinthians 5:18)

The Gospel is about reconciliation. Reconciliation between individuals and God. Reconciliation between individuals. Reconciliation between groups within society. Reconciliation is the very essence of the calling of the church. It is the church's *raison d'être*, its reason for existence.

Finally, here's the point: the church is not exempt from its own Gospel.

Indeed, on the night before he died, Jesus prayed for the church. What did he pray? "*That they may be one, as we are one.*" (John 17:22)

We, the church, have been working on that ever since. Amen.