

Sermon "Better on Television"
Kirk of St James
Sunday September 10, 2023
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Drama often makes for good television. Messy relationships, big fortunes, nail biting mystery, all add to a shows appeal. The recent television show *Succession* is a great example of this. Logan Roy, the head of a multi-million-dollar fortune is facing his own decline, and the show follows his life and his four children who are all trying to best position themselves. There is certainly a lot of drama. While drama is great on television it is likely something we do not want a whole lot of in our personal lives. It causes emotional upheaval, strained relationships, and pain. That being said it is incredibly difficult sometimes to deal with the painful parts of our lives, especially when others are involved.

I personally have always disliked fighting and confrontation. When I was home visiting mom this summer there were 11 of us in the house and we did not always agree, and I always tried to fly under the conflict radar. I guess we could say that disagreements are just part of life though. This aversion to confrontation also came to the fore when I came to our reading for this week in Matthew--I wanted to avoid talking about it at all! However, that is not an honest or practical approach to hurt and difficulty in our lives. From time to time, we will have confrontations or, have hurtful things come our way, and our gospel writer today has something to say about that.

We live in a world where hurt sometimes simmers close to the surface thinly veiled and often boiling over. From the continuing refugee crises, political divides, and even the struggles of First Nations communities here in our own country, deep hurt lives on. We also see it played out on a smaller scale every day in workplace feuds, broken families, and divided churches. While we may be able to see it and, we are aware of it, biblical scholar N.T Wright wrote a

powerful reflection on the struggle of reconciliation. He said one of the greatest challenges of reconciliation is our human tendency to want to brush over difficulty and pretend it is not there. He likens it to papering over the cracked walls of a home. Covering the cracks and broken pieces may look nice for a time but, eventually they will tear open again and perhaps even worse than before.

By pretending there is not a problem we refuse to face facts, and everything we are feeling simmers away under the surface whether it is hurt, rage, anger or, something else entirely. Slowly it eats away at us like rust on a metal surface, which over time weakens metal and if left long enough will cause it to crumble away completely. Sometimes, as N.T Wright also pointed out that if we do not take the "pretend it did not happen" stance, we sometimes just start to avoid and ignore the other person or, group which can become not only impractical but, also a place where anxiety begins to grow. What if we run into them unexpectedly? What will we do? Should we ignore them completely? Pretend we don't see them? We have likely all done this at some point in our lives. It is awkward, hurtful, and it is difficult to know what to do.

At the heart of both Christian community and relationship lies the word reconciliation. It is this process that Jesus outlines in our gospel lesson today. N.T Wright describes it as "severely practical as well as ruthlessly idealistic: not a bad combination." However, why should we bother with the work of reconciliation if we can just ignore our difficulties and keep on going? The answer to that question can be found among the words of the apostle Paul who spoke of the church as a body. There is a certain amount of interdependence, where we are incomplete without one another, where the suffering of one leads to the suffering of all. It is the same in our family groups. If you are sitting around the table and one of you is crying, or angry, or joyful the rest of us around the table are interacting with those emotions. Christ is in the

Church and, each of us has a place in the body of Christ, each of us is valued and important, and no one is more important than anyone else. Therefore, it is our job to care for one another and to help one another when we struggle.

So, what does this practical process of reconciliation look like? Jesus keeps it quite simple. It is important to note that this process is not about punishment--it is about reconciliation. This type of approach tries to prevent embarrassment or shame. It begins with the person who has been offended by someone, Christ tells them that they are to approach the person who has offended them and speak to them. If that does not work, they are to gather one or two people and go back to speak to them again. This role of taking along witnesses is not to intimidate, it comes from the Jewish tradition. It is meant to help validate the conversation and add their voices when speaking to the offender. If the offender still refuses to hear, then as a last resort the matter will be brought before the whole church. I always get a little nervous around this part. How do we bring a matter before the church in a way that is not hurtful?

Many of the commentaries I consulted talk about the collective wisdom and discernment of the body of Christ. In Jesus day this may have meant small, collected groups who were meeting together to pray, remind one another of Jesus' teachings, and to encourage one another. This is most likely what Jesus is envisioning when he speaks about coming before the group when the parties have not been able to resolve their conflict. Together they hope to come to a resolution through the love and unity of Christ. While I would like to stop the process at this point our passage takes one more step. If the parties affected are still unable to reach agreement, then the offender is to be treated "as a Gentile or a tax collector." When we think about the endless love and mercy of God this idea of letting them go seems at odds. N.T Wight points out that only when a problem has been faced can there be reconciliation. When a person refuses to

be reconciled there is not a lot that we can do. However, this description also has a deeper meaning.

Throughout his life Jesus was constantly criticized for extending himself to people of different lifestyles and backgrounds. We know for a fact that Jesus ate with tax collectors, and that his gospel message was meant for every person including the Gentiles. Even if we must let go for a while we never stop loving or caring for people even when they do not want to be reconciled. We never give up on them. Sometimes reconciliation takes time and work. Sometimes people need space, and this final command allows for that. We do not let go of the love and care we have for them; we just recognize that this is the healthiest way for us to be at this time.

A couple years ago the New York Times had an article called "Portraits of Reconciliation" which covered the stories of people 20 years after the genocide in Rwanda. I have mentioned it in church here before, it had a profound impact on me when I read it. This project asked how people were able to live together in the same village as the people who killed their families during the genocide. The article showed numerous photos with a similar subject. In each photo there is a Hutu perpetrator and a Tutsi survivor who granted them a pardon from their crime. After working together through a reconciliation program this article tells their stories. I just want to share one short one with you.

" DOMINIQUE: "The day I thought of asking pardon, I felt unburdened and relieved. I had lost my humanity because of the crime I committed, but now I am like any human being."

MUNGANYINKA: "After I was chased from my village and Dominique and others looted it, I became homeless and insane. Later, when he asked my pardon, I said: 'I have nothing to feed my children. Are you going to help raise my children? Are you going to build a house for them?'

The next week, Dominique came with some survivors and former prisoners who perpetrated genocide. There were more than 50 of them, and they built my family a house. Ever since then, I have started to feel better. I was like a dry stick; now I feel peaceful in my heart, and I share this peace with my neighbors.”

I know this case is extreme and likely miles away from many of the situations we would face on a daily basis. That being said when I hear stories like these they stand as a powerful reminder of what reconciliation can look like. Jesus assumes that there will be conflict in our lives, including in our Christian communities. "What makes us Christian is not whether or not we fight, disagree, or wound one another, but how we go about addressing and resolving these issues."

I challenge all of this week whether it is in our homes, our work or other communities and relationships we are in, to practice reconciliation when the need arises. As one commentary writer summed up "If we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it? If the church--no matter how small, even just two or three believers --will agree in Christ and seek prayerfully to do the will of God, then God will respond. The church will really be the church because Jesus will be present.” Be an example of the love and mercy of Christ to all you meet, and wherever needed offer reconciliation as best you can, to be an example of what is possible in the power of Christ.