

The Risks of Reconciliation

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Most of us have someone in our life we have given up on. It's a disquieting thing to say, but it's true. There are people who continually disappoint us, who constantly seem to live down to our low expectations of them, and who prove to themselves and others that they are impossible to fix. This is not to say we don't care about them, like them, or even love them, but we just don't know what to do about them; we don't have much hope that they'll ever get their act together. In the world of winners and losers, they are the ones who chronically choose to lose. And for that they only have themselves to blame.

The ones I can identify in my own life also tend to be high maintenance people, requiring a lot of attention and care. Typically, they're addicted to something, but even when it appears they're dealing with that, when things start to turn around, they find a way to sabotage their progress and stability. Typically, they fall into a cycle of feeling sorry for themselves, diving into a self-created crisis with its corresponding depression, beckoning those around them to come to their aid. In their pathological narcissism, they want the rest of us to suffer their misery and their loss with them—that it's not enough they suffer alone. And then feeling ashamed for having done this, they bottom out, find some help for awhile, get back on track, only to set themselves up for yet another failure. This cycle goes on for, perhaps, years. They are addicted to many things, including self-destruction. It's like Sisyphus on steroids.

I don't mean to be hard on such people; more often than not, I have compassion and empathy, which is why I'm so easily manipulated into coming back to help them. I'm a borderline enabler; I would give just about anything to see them cross the psychological and spiritual threshold to mastering their lives and being delivered from the demons that haunt their respective souls. I keep hoping that at some point it will all click in and they'll figure out how to control their impulses enough to stabilize themselves and find their way to a new life—the redemption that I can see, but they can't.

After a while, that's what wears us down as caretakers or interveners; we're the only ones in this exchange who seem hopeful that something could possibly change. All of this can become terribly personal and painful. My brother, Tim, who ended his life just about a year ago, was one of these people, and now his family and friends go on with precisely what he may have intended: the lingering guilt over a lost life that we could not redeem.

In a world of many mercies, some things just refuse to get fixed. Apparently, that's one of the lessons I've had to learn in life. Not everyone allows themselves to be redeemable.

Perhaps for that reason, I worry about becoming callous and uncaring, not just about situations that are unfixable, but especially for those that are. What I mean is, there are people we give up on when we shouldn't. There are strained and broken relationships in our lives that refuse to be healed, not because they are unfixable, but usually because we don't care enough about the person to reconcile. They may have been important to us at one point but, through some rupture in the relationship, we have given up on them because we no

longer seem to care about the person or the relationship. It could be a former spouse, an old acquaintance or friend, or someone with whom we spent significant time, but for some reason, the relationship soured.

In most of these cases, if we were honest, the only thing that prevents reconciliation is our own stubborn refusal to apologize, or the justifications we harbor over bitter memories of words or actions that hurt us deeply, so that, instead of wanting to patch things up and heal the relationship, we have given up altogether and moved on with our life. We no longer care that much about the person, and we feel justified in no longer caring. We've built our arsenal of excuses and our army of advocates who support us in our anger and they help to keep us committed to it. Though it appears the brokenness doesn't matter to us, deep down we know it does.

As therapists and sages remind us, none of the ugly experiences we've had really dissipate and leave us unaffected. Like memory chips in a computer, all the stuff of our life is still there. The emotions simply show up in other situations similar to the ones that fractured the earlier friendship. If there was a way to do an MRI of our souls, we'd see it plainly; all the fractures, scars, and lesions of resentment, anger, complaints, and rivalry are evident just below the surface of our public skin. It shows up in how we communicate with others and how we characterize certain people. Whenever a reminder of the person comes up, instead of offering lighter banter, what's underneath surfaces through barbed comments and chronic complaints. Eventually, unchecked, all this does is poison the character and temper of one's life.

M. Scott Peck, the psychiatrist and spiritual writer, once wrote:

The overall purpose of human communication is - or should be - reconciliation. It should ultimately serve to lower or remove the walls of misunderstanding which unduly separate us human beings, one from another. ¹

Reconciliation, not denial or indifference, is really the friend of our mental and spiritual health, but it comes with a cost and with challenging obstacles and risks. Still, it's an important remedy for healing what really hurts us in the depths of our hearts.

Reconciliation isn't just an important lesson of psychotherapy, it's also one of the great themes of our faith. The Apostle Paul even considered followers of Jesus to be "ambassadors of reconciliation"—meaning, we are called to reconcile human relationships with God and between each other. The bases for this, of course, are Jesus' teachings and parables and later on, how the early church came to interpret the divine purpose behind Jesus' death on the cross—the theology of the atonement, if you will—a perspective that still shapes the church today, though a growing number of theologians are reevaluating and reinterpreting its meaning. However it gets illustrated or interpreted, reconciliation is a key objective in fostering right-relationships with God and with our neighbor.

The story of the prodigal child is one of the prominent illustrations of reconciliation we'll find in Scripture, reflecting the underlying theology of divine love and healing. I don't need to take much time to explain it, since it is already so well known and the story is fairly self-explanatory. The younger of two sons returns home after

¹ M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*, Simon & Schuster, 1987, pg. 257.

spending time away running through his inheritance foolishly. Instead of getting is just due, he is received warmly and lovingly by his waiting father.

The story, however, can be as much about the older brother left behind, who resents not only his younger brother and his thoughtless antics, but also his father for not holding the prodigal accountable for his actions. The older son's resentment builds and burns over the injustice of it all, since mercy trumps justice in this particular household, and apparently in the divine economy as well. Why does the bad child get rewarded, while the good one is taken for granted?

Now this message of unmerited mercy is not lost on us, as it has been inherent to Christian teachings for thousands of years.

Forgiveness is the divine act of grace. At our more noble moments, most of us would appreciate, if not embrace, the moral logic of this story—appreciating the metaphor that God loves us as human beings, even when we are thoroughly undeserving of it. We might even have invested our lives on this Gospel truth, after a bit of prodigal living in our own right. As far as divine-human relations go, that's how we'd want it to be!

In our all-too-human reality, though, we might find ourselves identifying more with the older son who, in his view, felt justified in his anger and resentment toward his brother for manipulating the situation to his advantage and playing his father for a sucker. The story of these two brothers is a marvelous metaphor for how people behave in families and in society in general. We can offer all the reasons why the prodigal should have suffered a worse fate, and we, like the older brother, might even criticize the father under our breath

for being an enabler, letting his emotions dictate his response, rather than reason and wisdom. The way things played out suggests unmerited amnesty, more than reconciliation, especially when there were still so many unresolved issues within the family. In the end, the story, like life, leaves us hanging over whether older son had given up on these significant relationships in his life. We never find out.

This is important to note, particularly when we accentuate the place of love and mercy within our faith. Do we really believe that, enough to express it? There are many reasons why mercy frustrates us, and why it is counterintuitive to our sense of fairness.

Reconciliation involves many obstacles and risks; it doesn't just happen without the real possibility of having it blow up in our faces. For one thing, it's hard to heal a relationship when you're nursing your hurt. When you encounter someone who has said or done something to upset you, you don't easily forget and then act as if it never happened. It's hard to reconcile when you can't stop focusing on what upsets you about the other.

Another risk is the matter of trust. How do you repair trust when it has been broken? The ease of innocence is lost; trust has to be earned and, as we know in most cases, its wages are minimal. Then one more risk we don't consider enough is the issue of control. When a person is angry, they actually take control of the relationship at that moment. Anger sets the terms for how things will proceed; the wounded person is the one who makes demands—who requires an offender to apologize. Letting go of that anger, especially if what justifies it hasn't been satisfied, runs right against the grain of human

nature. Sometimes, we refuse mercy because we want our anger to control the other as much as it's controlled us!

Which brings us back to this story. All of these things and more factor into how this story plays out. Jesus wasn't being naïve in presenting this as a common illustration for human reconciliation, as much as it is a remarkable statement about divine peacemaking. All of these risks are inherent to any act of reconciliation, which is why this is not easy to do, and why, when it does occur, it turns out to be such a divine mercy.

Reconciliation, more than we realize at times, is counterintuitive to human nature; it is not an expected outcome for most broken relationships. It's not a natural way we humans deal with our conflicts. It requires a measure of interest and courage that exceeds what most of us are usually willing to invest. Most people settle with cautious indifference so they can avoid the pain and move on. They give up on the relationship. Honestly, when you've been burned (especially more than once), mercy is an afterthought—it's not a natural overture.

For that reason, a spirit of reconciliation has to be cultivated within us. It has to be sustained with inspiration and faith in order to face and address the risks it entails. It takes effort and thought to overcome our resentments; courage must be summoned to make merciful overtures—to offer a compassionate and kind response to our adversary. Reconciliation even has to be imagined, since there's little basis for it at first. We have to nurture within us a level of care for the other person—to see them not as an enemy, but as a friend—as “new creations” to use Pauline language—someone more worthy of

love than hate. Most of that work is internal to us, not resting with another. Most of it is an act of faith.

Though many of our expressions of mercy may never measure up to the full embrace of the Prodigal Son's father (which is quite remarkable, based entirely on forgiveness and self-giving love), we can at least do better than the older brother, who seems to have been just as narcissistic about his own petty complaints and interests as was his younger sibling in his folly. It doesn't matter on which end of life you find yourself, narcissism is the natural curse to our souls. And love is the most compelling and fruitful reason not to give up on someone else.

Ultimately, whether or not a person is "fixable" is not up to us, it's up to them. That's to be understood. But what is fixable are the broken relationships we can mend—if not completely and cooperatively achieved, then at least imagined and attempted from our end, where forgiveness offered to another heals, at minimum, our own heart and spirit. That alone can be a miracle in its own right, and it certainly can be experienced as a divine mercy. And sometimes, that is enough to allow us to go on.

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