

The First Step of Reconciliation

A Sermon Expositing Matthew 18:15-20

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The evening fire had been set and my friends had gathered 'round as the sun started to dip below the horizon casting golden light long across the expanse of one of the most storied, beautiful places on earth and there I sat – *seething*. I was one of about 240 people who ventured from Baylor University to Kenya in the hope we might hear and share the stories of leaders in a developing country and be of some help while we were there. In order to get past our jet lag and rest from our travels before the work began we spent our first two days on safari in the Massai Mara, one of the largest land and wildlife preserves in the world stunning in its reach and beauty. Even as the landscape became invisible as night encroached, the wonder of the place still came to visit us. Little monkeys would climb down out of the trees next to where we were sitting that evening to become acquainted with their visitors and perhaps to see if they might relieve us of our snack food. For a bunch of travel-weary college kids who'd never seen a monkey in its natural habitat the moment added whimsy on top of the beauty of the place. Magical.

But I wasn't having any of it. You see in the weeks prior we had all been through culture training back in Texas so that we would know a few things about how to navigate Kenyan customs. As part of that we were given a simple list of do's and don'ts so as to prevent miscommunications or offense to our gracious host nation. While there have been pushes toward change, Kenyan culture is still quite patriarchal. It was rare in those days to see men and women, even those who were married together to walk side by side in a public place and any sign of public affection, even holding hands, would have been a significant breach in cultural standards.

I knew that. I took copious notes in those training sessions and I was prepared to represent my country, my university, and my faith well. That's why in what seemed like the last moments before entering a culture that would require me to behave somewhat differently, I chose to make the walk to the fire that evening hand-in-hand with someone I cared for deeply. You may or may not have met this person. The leader of our trip and University chaplain crossed our paths and asked if he could chat with me for a moment in private. It didn't seem odd, because my team on the trip was embedded with his. I figured we had details to discuss. Actually, he wanted to let me know that he had seen me holding hands with a girl – something that even by Baylor's dated standards was not typically frowned upon – and he wanted to remind me that our hosts at the camp could experience that as very odd, potentially even be offended. My face blushed red. I was embarrassed – at first. But then I was indignant. *I know the rules!* I took notes! I was already enrolled in seminary for the following year, a minister in the works, a rule follower, a conscientious person working with the main leadership team for our trip. I didn't need a reminder! Indignance turned to anger and feelings of shame came up. I was respectful and thanked him for the reminder and went on to the fire, but to this day I remember sitting there trying to put on a happy face while on the inside I was experiencing a hot wash of negative emotions. He wasn't harsh or rude or punitive. He just reminded me, but still I was humiliated and frustrated and irritated and just plain mad. There I was just on the verge of boundless beauty and wonder and I couldn't see any of it, because I was all torn up inside from someone daring to tell me that I was in the wrong.

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

Jesus didn't expect perfection you know. In fact, today's gospel lesson is a prime example of Jesus *assuming* that sometimes people would hurt one another in the life of the community biblical translators have called "the church." It wasn't a group in a denomination who got together on Zoom every week, but it was a community centered in following the way of Jesus. Within that community, Jesus thought it would be good to have some ideas about how to deal with it when two people are at odds with each other, when one hurts another knowingly or otherwise. Try to solve it individually at first, that's the best way for everyone to save face and re-enter relationship. If that's not successful the aggrieved party should put together some faithful witnesses. Witnesses to the slight in question or just witnesses to the proceedings of the conversation we're not really sure. Maybe both. Bring in some faithful others who can aid in conversation from a neutral footing. Only if that doesn't work do you give each other some distance. Its worth noting Jesus gives no suggestion of how to completely sever the relationship, but that's a topic the fullness of which we'll save for another day. The point is: bring your complaint in gradual, controlled, patient escalation the better by which to restore relationship. You see, Jesus didn't expect the community who followed him to be marked by their perfection. He expected them to be marked by reconciliation. The instructions here are about how to seek reconciliation when you've been wronged.

Sometimes it is necessary though, to read scripture from a slightly different angle. Because we are Jesus followers we tend to assume that when Jesus is standing up for someone he's standing up for us; when he's calling someone out it's those who stand against us; when he's blessing he's blessing us; when he's cursing he's cursing our adversaries. But we have to acknowledge, each in our own lives, and we as a community of faith our own social location. We do not all have the same background. Some among us bear heavy scars of systemic oppression, some have fresh wounds still open and aching. Some among us were born into the social locations our society most greatly prizes carrying great privilege. Many among us are somewhere between bearing some scars and carrying some privilege. That means most of us can't assume scripture is speaking for us or about us or to us. Sometimes the message for us in scripture comes from *overhearing* what scripture says. For instance, what if I am not the aggrieved party in the scenario Jesus laid out this morning? What if I am the one being asked to consider my own actions and their impact on others? I can feel that hot rush rising. Nobody likes to be called out – especially not by the Bible, especially not by Jesus.

Jesus's explicit instructions in Matthew are for those who feel aggrieved, but if we listen closely there is an implicit instruction for those who have caused harm also. They have a role to play in reconciliation too. If you notice, as the gradual progression of expression of grievance escalates, at each turn the signal to move ahead is when the hearer will not listen. That means the first step in moving to reconciliation – *maybe not the fullness of reconciliation* – but the thing that halts the process and moves in that direction is to listen.

Dear friends, even as we continue to struggle with what life in a pandemic looks like, and even as we as a faith community support our own in times of illness and injury, and even as we mourn our own losses we cannot afford to miss what is happening right here in our city. In the days ahead you will be making decisions on how to hear the voices of protestors crying out for justice and change – two sometimes synonyms for *reconciliation*. We as humans have developed some great tactics for not listening and here they are.

The first is by displacing blame. These protests began after it came to light that another black body was killed during an interaction with police (this time in our city) and that there were efforts to prevent this from coming to light in the community. While some shockingly struggle to find the horror in that, even those who do, have a temptation to let the blame stop at the individuals who were there and who participated physically in Daniel Prude's homicide and with civic leadership. There is plenty of fault there to be sure, but the problem of racism is systemic. That means that things like this can happen in our community precisely because we have not yet been vocal enough about the expectations we hold on how our community should be provided for and protected. Yes, friends, we are complicit. Do you feel that hot rush rising? Nobody likes to be called out. It makes us want to stop listening.

A second way we avoid listening is by rebutting the grievances we're told about by letting that hot rush of emotions we get when called out convince us that we are, in fact, the aggrieved party. Again, some among

our community *have and do* experience the scars of racial injustice. Those of us who are not impacted directly often experience claims of our culpability as attacks and we proclaim our victimhood. This is a tendency that psychologists attribute to abusive persons called gaslighting. Don't be a gaslighter.

Thirdly, we don't listen by applying standards unevenly in interpreting what we're being told. We attribute the best behavior of parties we identify with to everyone within that group, but we attribute the worst behavior of parties we don't identify with to the entire group. In this way we polarize the conflict and deem one side unworthy of our ear.

Fourth, we allow our own preconceived understanding or our own sense of comfort to shade the way we interpret what we're being told.

Fifth, we become militantly defensive of the ground we stand on.

All of these rise from that hot rush of emotion we get when we're told that we have caused harm, that we've done wrong. So here we sit, upset and feeling those feelings while protestors in our streets have gathered two or more witnesses to come to us and let us know that something has to change. We have a list of ways we can choose not to listen, but we could choose instead to listen – to learn, to empathize, to process, to understand and to let those things influence the way we participate in holding those we've trusted to order our lives together to account.

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

The road to reconciliation puts us on the verge of untold beauty and wonder and yes, even whimsy, but it begins with listening.

Amen.