

April Reflections

Luke's marvelous parable of the Prodigal Son (15: 11-32) is a classic story filled with a surplus of meaning. We typically reflect on it with the question of forgiveness in mind. The wayward son violates social custom by demanding his share of the inheritance while his father is still alive. After publicly embarrassing his father, he goes off to a foreign land where he squanders his inheritance in a life of dissipation. Finding himself in the religiously compromising situation of tending swine and not having enough to eat, he comes to his senses and decides to return to his father's house where he can work as a hired hand. His father, presumably on the lookout for his son, spots him a long way off, and, in totally untypical fashion, runs to greet him with an embrace and a kiss. Before the prodigal can get out his whole prepared apology, his father orders a great feast for his son who was dead and has come to life again. This part of the parable remains for us a profound resource for reflecting on the multifaceted theme of forgiveness: for example, the teaching and practice of Jesus, who ate with sinners and forgave his enemies; the mercy and compassion of God, who is always ready to forgive us, to wipe the slate clean, to offer new opportunities for growth; and the Christian responsibility to bring the gift of forgiveness to strained personal relationships.

Luke's classic parable, however, contains another theme that calls for further reflection. The older son, consistently dutiful to his father, is angry at the preferential treatment given to the wayward son and refuses to enter the celebration. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, the father pleads with his son to join the party, reminding him of their own close relationship and insisting that he think of the prodigal not as a wayward son but as his own brother who was dead and has come to life again. The decision of the older son is crucial to the wellbeing of the family. We can imagine the predicament of the father dealing on a daily basis with two sons who are not getting along. When I ask people whether the older son goes into the party, most people respond, yes he does. This anecdotal evidence may suggest the importance attached to harmonious family relationships, or, perhaps, the desire to avoid abrasive personal interactions. At any rate, it is clear that the Prodigal Son parable deals not only with the issue of forgiveness, but also with another major theme that is well named "reconciliation." The father needs and wants a reconciled family situation. The forgiveness he generously offered to his younger son, as well as the heartfelt plea to the older son, are both part of a larger project of reconciliation, making harmonious family relationships possible.

In his writings and lectures, theologian Robert Schreiter, a Precious Blood priest, has brought to attention the importance of reconciliation in developing a constructive and effective Christian spirituality (cf. *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies*, Orbis, 1998). Schreiter learned important things about the reconciliation process by examining the way South Africa dealt with the horrendous crimes of the apartheid system, which denied citizenship to the black majority and enforced total segregation. Under international pressure, the white government released Nelson Mandela in 1989 after 27 years of imprisonment for anti-government activities. After Mandela was elected president in 1994, he made the crucial decision not to hold criminal trials to convict and punish those guilty of human rights violations during the apartheid era. Instead, he set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, that sponsored hearings all over the country where victims could tell their stories and perpetrators could confess their crimes under the protection of amnesty. Schreiter tells the story of a particular session when a young man admitted killing a father and son. A black woman in the court room recognized he was talking about her husband and son, and, in an amazing act of forgiveness, went over and embraced him. The work of the Commission was by no means perfect: some white leaders refused to testify or apologize; many who applied for amnesty were denied; individuals guilty of serious crimes went unpunished. Mandela, Tutu and others, however, were convinced that uncovering the truth of apartheid

injustice and achieving reconciliation provided the best path to a viable South Africa where black and white could live and work together.

From this societal perspective, we see that individual acts of forgiveness, intrinsically important as they are, take on a deeper meaning when they serve the larger cause of reconciliation. We can debate the effectiveness of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its applicability to other troubled spots in our world, but there is no doubt that the broad intent of the process reflects the Gospel ideal of establishing a reconciled, inclusive community of peace, justice and love.

The Apostle Paul understood the importance of reconciliation in the Christian life. He insisted that it is a gift from God who takes the initiative in reconciling the human family to its original Source and ultimate Goal through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This vertical dimension of reconciliation, already made definitively and irrevocably present through the Paschal Mystery, will achieve its final fulfillment at the end of time when Christ completes his work. In the meantime, God “has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18), the horizontal task of healing the wounds of estrangement and division that threaten the harmony and unity of the human family. God’s gift of reconciliation calls for our cooperation to make it real and visible in our world.

Effective ministers of reconciliation seem to share certain spiritual traits: gratitude to God for the gift of healing; a willingness to participate in the paschal dynamics of Christ’s death and resurrection; an expectation that the Spirit who makes all things new can transform enemies into friends; a preferential option for victims of destructive relationships and societal injustice; a commitment to work with others who favor forgiveness over punishment; and a fundamental trust that God’s reconciling power will finally prevail despite human limitations and failures. A solidly grounded spirituality of reconciliation is open to a variety of strategies that help create a more humane situation. The tense truce in Northern Ireland opens up the possibility of genuine reconciliation in the future. Affirmative action programs in the United States are designed to help racial minorities overcome a long history of racism and enjoy the blessings of a just society; the Common Ground Project, spearheaded by Cardinal Bernardine, envisioned a reconciled Catholic community where dialogue serves as a tool for overcoming the destructive dynamics of polarization. Effective marriage counseling enables a troubled couple to live in a more harmonious situation where they and their children can flourish. An individual takes the initiative to repair a ruptured friendship by apologizing for his part in the dispute. A young woman abused by her father forgives him, leading to a reconciled relationship. Effective reconcilers envision the shape of a reconciled situation and find the best means of achieving it.

Apology can play an important role in the reconciliation process. While serving as president of South Africa from 1989-1994, F.W. de Klerk, recognizing the human rights violations during the apartheid era, issued a public apology, which helped facilitate the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. On the first Sunday of Lent during the Jubilee year 2000, Pope John Paul II made an unprecedented public confession to God for the sins committed by Catholics who “deviated from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel.” A litany at the Mass noted some examples: dividing the body of Christ; violating human rights; and offending various groups, including women, Jews, and members of other religions - - a bold admission that did spark hopes for more harmonious relationships. During his visit to the United States in 2008, Pope Benedict met with victims of clergy sex abuse and issued a heartfelt apology, which enabled some to be reconciled with the church. We know from our own experience the power of apology in personal relationships. When a person who offended us apologizes, it becomes much easier to reestablish a healthy relationship. The simple words “I’m sorry” have an amazing power to heal wounds and to open up new possibilities for mutual growth.

In troubled human affairs, we cannot always count on apologies to initiate or facilitate a process of reconciliation. The act of forgiveness, on the other hand, is not dependent on the decisions of others, but resides within our own power. Deciding to forgive others is an act of freedom, whereby we choose not to be controlled by past offences so that we can actively seek a new reconciled future. When we forgive someone who harmed us in the past, we take away their power to keep hurting us. Forgiveness is not a matter of ignoring or forgetting the past, nor does it involve condoning unjust and hurtful behavior. "Forgive and forget" is not a biblical ideal, nor is it good advice. The call to forget trivializes destructive behavior and fails to offer proper respect to victims. We should never forget the suffering caused by the monstrous evil of the Holocaust, the Gulag, the Killing Fields and institutional racism: by wars and regional conflicts; by church-related inquisitions, crusades and sexual abuse; by domestic violence, abuse and neglect; and by broken relationships and personal betrayal. For the most part, we cannot simply forget our personal wounds, but we can remember them in a new way, without the anger, resentment and vengeance that seems to cling naturally to them. This requires a healing of memories that recalls the past without neglecting the good and without being overwhelmed by the negative. This is a great spiritual challenge for most of us. Christians can find enlightenment and inspiration in the example of Jesus, who asked God to forgive his executioners and taught his disciples to forgive enemies. All forgiveness comes as a gift from God. Remembering how God has forgiven us can motivate us to share the gift of forgiveness with others. Genuine forgiveness recognizes the good in those who hurt us while refusing to identify them with their misdeeds; it also allows them to begin anew with us without confining them to their past failures. Viewed in this way, forgiveness is an essential component of the reconciliation process that seeks a more harmonious situation which reflects the love of God, the example of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to make all things new.