

The Bridge of Friendship
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When Caroline and I had just graduated from Pittsburgh Seminary, we went to serve as co-pastors in a small town in western Ohio, Covington Ohio. Covington had about 2500 residents, and was surrounded on all sides by about 5 miles of cornfields. An idyllic place.

But once a year, Covington has a major festival, called Fort Rowdy Days, which attracts people from all over, even out of state, in the fall of the year. It celebrates a small bit of history where a peace and reconciliation was reached between the Shawnee and other tribes with white settlers in the late 1790's.

To celebrate and honor this, there is a re-enactment of the peace, with Natives coming in traditional dress, white settlers dress in period clothes and they set up encampments at the festival site. The symbolism is even better as there is a stream that runs through the grounds, and the Natives encamp on one side while the settlers' tents are on the other.

The peace is symbolized by a wooden bridge constructed just for the festival across the water, which is so benign it is called the Stillwater River. The wooden bridge connects the two sides and allows the flow of people and ideas and culture and trust to flow back and forth.

So wonderful right? But in October of 1995 when we were there, heavy rains had fallen for nearly a week in Ohio, and the Stillwater River became a raging rapid. It was exceeding its banks, and threatening the campsites that were being built, and making the campers miserable.

Just two days before the start of formal festivities, campers from both sides noticed a large tree limb

coming down the river heading for the wooden footbridge. This bridge was just a simple construction, certainly not designed for flood conditions.

The limb crashed into the bridge and people from both sides came together to try and save it. Ropes were tied around the sides, and people tried pulling and tugging to save the bridge. It did not take long for the force of the water and the tree to break through the center of the bridge and send its pieces floating off down stream or onto the banks like toothpicks.

The symbolic Bridge of Friendship had been broken, and now what? How were they going to repair it before the festival began?

Just as the symbolism goes, relationships between people can be thought of as a bridge of friendship. Each side builds out a little until there is a support of ideas a connection of love in which communication and sharing can flow back and forth.

But we know, our bridges are not built to withstand everything which threatens to destroy them. Things happen, words are said, even violence may ensue which is so great that the bridge just breaks down. We are left on opposite sides of a wide gulf and can no longer seem to communicate.

Bridges of friendship can also break down between groups as well.

I thought of my experience at Covington, as we have been watching almost helplessly the feelings of division and fear and anger we are experiencing not only in our country, and our streets but across the world today.

Like the Fort Rowdy Festival Commission, I am thinking about how are we going to rebuild these bridges in our world?

I understand it may even be too soon to think about this. As we noted last week, many still angry, still filled with sadness and heartbreak over police brutality, property destruction, systemic racism, violence and inequality. I understand that.

If you are still there, it is ok.

But as you and I are theologians and followers of Jesus, we are asking ourselves, what can the church do about this, in addition to what can I personally do about this?

What can church do?

Lobby, work for justice, exhort, protest, vote and more -we are doing that, and will do that. We are joining with many other ecumenical and secular groups to do all of that and more.

But this parable of Jesus in Matthew made me think - What can church do that that no one else can or will? The answer is Work for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Because in the gospels, Jesus is in the business of bridge building and repair. He came for reconciliation and restoration of relationship between people and cultures.

An old motto of the Civil Rights movement was Demonstration, Legislation, Reconciliation. We never seem to get to that last one.

The Fort Rowdy Festival could not rebuild that bridge in October 1995. But when we were there in October of

1996, that bridge was built with thick wood, reinforcements, nails and footers.

Jesus tells us the bridge of friendship is always built with reconciliation.

Jesus, the master storyteller, tells us a parable which illustrates first of all how God bridges the gap between us and the holy.

In the story a king has discovered that one of his trusted staff has stolen a large amount of revenue, maybe from the Kings tax stores. We hear that this is equivalent of 15 years of wages in the day. An amount impossible to repay.

The king decides to auction off the man and his family into slavery to the highest bidder. But as the servant pleads for mercy, the king has a change of heart, and simply lets him go.

Imagine the joy and relief he must have felt.

But we quickly move to scene two of the parable. The man who has been forgiven the enormous debt encounters his friend who owes him a small debt. The servant turns around and threatens the man who owes him money. His friend pleads for mercy and forgiveness.

The servant, even after receiving grace himself, ruthlessly refuses to grant any forgiveness on a much smaller matter.

The king gets wind of the story. This time the king comes down hard on him because the servant did not show forgiveness even as he had been forgiven.

So we don't over analyze this story, the point is this - God forgives our mistakes, our willfulness, our

disobedience. What will God think about those who will not reconcile with each other?

The last line in that parable is an instruction from Jesus to

"forgive your brother or sister from your heart"

We as followers of Jesus are as Paul says, ambassadors for Christ trusting the message of reconciliation to us.

What does the message of reconciliation look like right now? I can't even say. Maybe it is too early. But maybe these steps can help us get started. I would start with two things.

First, something that involves what we do in our worship every week. Speaking the truth in love. Confession of wrongs. It involves truth. It is hard to correct wrongs or injustice if they are not named. Speaking the truth in love.

Scott Clark sent us an article from Sojourners Magazine this week, and in it Courtney Ariel writes about a quote she heard once at a meeting of AlAnon:

"We are only as sick as our secrets (and our shame)." Shame can only live in the darkness; it can live within the systems of denial and defensiveness that we use to cover it up. We have to name these things, acknowledge them, and begin to do the deep work of transformation, restoration – and reparation.

Second, Courtney writes, it involves listening.

"For one out of every three opinions/insights shared by a person in your life, try to resist the need to respond with a *better* or *different* insight about

something that you read or listened to as it relates to their shared opinion.

Try just to listen and sit with someone else's experience.

Both of those things were put into practice in something called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. If you are an old Political Science student like me, you will remember this was the grand experiment at the end of apartheid in South Africa. Analysts will debate how effective it was or was not, but it was a theological approach to a social, cultural and economic problem.

The commission established a Register for people to speak the truth in love, listen to the pain and loss and accept or grant forgiveness as the case might be.

This was their official description:

The register has been established in response to a deep wish for reconciliation in the hearts of many South Africans -- people who did not perhaps commit gross violations of human rights but nevertheless wish to indicate their regret for failures in the past to do all they could have done to prevent such violations; people who want to demonstrate in some symbolic way their commitment to a new kind of future in which human rights abuses will not take place.

Speaking the truth in love, and deep listening will begin the healing process. It is already underway in many places.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are really about seeing the world through another person's eyes. Or seeing them through Jesus eyes.

The parable of the unforgiving servant is a hard reminder of our own humanity and imperfection compared to God in Christ Jesus.

Our faith tells us the debt that God forgives us is massive, yet God builds the bridge out to us with a simple message of "you are forgiven" What God asks is to free us to ask for or accept or give forgiveness to another to reconcile with each other.

You are an ambassador for Christ. An agent of reconciliation.

I have already seen signs of truth telling and deep listening in our streets, our blogs, our conversations. It is a long journey, but We're in the business of bridge repair. May it be so.