

First Be Reconciled

A Sermon by Rev. Brian W. Keith

"If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23,24).

Our life consists of routines--patterns which govern much of our conscious existence. While some are ruts from which we would love to break out, most of our routines were consciously chosen for good reasons. If our wake-up routines are disturbed, we are likely to emerge from the house unshaven, or with unusual clothing combinations. If we had no set pattern for going about our daily chores, either at work or at home, we would accomplish far less. And our interactions with others are governed by the dictates of politeness and common courtesy. These kinds of patterns enable us to expend the minimum amount of energy and focus upon what is important.

Unfortunately, such routines can also be used to avoid facing unpleasant situations. What happens when a friend makes a critical comment that we take personally, or the extra effort we put into a project is ignored? Our tendency may be to ignore the offense. We may be bothered, but we try to forget and get on with our lives.

If it is a minor problem, or something so out of the ordinary that it will not recur, we probably can just forget about it--write it off to someone's having a bad day, or our being overly sensitive. We know that to raise the issue will only cause pain and not produce any good. This appears to be the reason why the Lord was silent when falsely accused (see Matt. 27:12-14). He knew that nothing He could say would change their minds, and words spoken in frustration and anger would certainly not be of any use to them.

But often when we attempt to just ignore the hurt, we hang onto it. We keep it inside and let it seethe and bubble just beneath the surface. It may be the co-worker who takes the Lord's name in vain. We may try to ignore it, for fear of appearing too good, or because we do not want to cause trouble. But it keeps bothering us. It grates and increases our overall irritability. Perhaps we cannot identify it as the source, but we

may find ourselves with a shorter temper and more prone to feel bad about how the day has gone.

This seems to be the state that the Lord was addressing when He told people to leave their gift before the altar and work things out with their brothers. People of that time could think they were fulfilling all their religious obligations by obeying certain laws and regularly offering sacrifices. The Lord pointed out that just going through the motions when there is an inner turmoil is not acceptable. Gifts to the Lord are not received from someone who is agitated and angry at others. When there is conflict between us and another, the Lord would have us face the situation and deal with it rather than let it be a source of continuing upset. For pretending a problem does not exist rarely makes it go away. In fact, it usually complicates the problem, making it more difficult to resolve later.

When someone has hurt our feelings and we try to hide it, we will more than likely wind up complaining to friends. Their willingness to listen will probably encourage our sense of injustice, and magnify the irritation and anger. Then we will see more and more what is wrong with the person who has offended us, and be looking for ways to even the score.

"But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matt. 5:39). Obviously the Lord does not intend us to invite attack and abuse (see AE 556:8). What He does want is for us to refrain from responding in anger and with revenge. When we are hurting, it seems to be so easy and satisfying to hurt others, but nothing good comes of it. Evil for evil does not lead to good. The Lord would have us leave our gifts before the altar and reconcile things with our brothers.

When we have been hurt and seek reconciliation, the first step is looking at ourselves. The Lord said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:10). There is no blessing in being persecuted as an end in itself, but only if it is for righteousness' sake. When we are criticized, has there been a good reason for it? Has the complaint against us been valid? In the heat of indignation we tend not to admit any guilt. And if we torment our minds with the cruelty of it, we will find even more reasons to deny any fault on our part. But how often are we entirely innocent, entirely without fault? Like any argument, rarely was it started or continued by just one.

Beyond being hurt by criticism, we have to look at ourselves whenever we feel pain. We can unconsciously place ourselves in positions where we are likely to get hurt. One of the great tragedies of alcoholism is that the spouse or close friends of the alcoholic often aid and abet the disease. Yes, they get hurt by the unkept promises, the lies, the degenerating behavior. But their denial of the problem prevents treatment, the hope of recovery, and they often welcome the pain as a perverse kind of punishment for their own sense of guilt.

Reconciliation begins by looking at ourselves first, for that puts us into the proper frame of mind. We should first remove the plank from our own eyes before we can see to remove the speck from our brother's (Matt. 7:5). If we approach someone in anger, then he will not be able to hear us--he will be too busy defending himself. Our words will not be of use unless they come from love and are spoken in charity. Reconciliation requires that we shun anger, hatred, and revenge (see Life 73). These must be removed from our minds before there is any feeling of love or concern for others (see AE 746:19).

In a sense, what is required is agreement. "Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him ... " (Matt. 5:25). Seeking for what agrees means looking for truth in the criticism. Perhaps what was said or done was, at least in some measure, deserved. If we can remove ourselves from the situation and try to be objective about ourselves, we can often prosper from criticism. One of the uses of the evil spirits in the other world is to draw out what is hellish in others so they might see it and shun it. When they attack someone, their intent is to harm, but it can be turned to good by the Lord.

Along the same lines, Swedenborg was once accosted by some who said there was nothing but evil in him (see AC 10808). Apparently their intent was to drive him away. "But it was given me to reply that I well know that such is the case.. Imagine their surprise when he agreed with them! He could have taken it personally and been offended. Instead he used it as an occasion for instruction. By his agreeing with them, their desire to hurt was deflected, and no harm was done.

Then, after looking at oneself, reconciliation requires confrontation. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother" (Matt. 18:15). Rather than keep it inside, letting anger build, talk to the person. For change cannot come about unless there is knowledge that it is needed.

Certainly if we were doing something that bothered others, we would appreciate knowing it. If a joke went too far, or if we are not allowing others to finish their stories, we need to be made aware of it so that we can stop. So if we are offended, we are to go to that person, privately, and explain. It has to be done with love, not anger. But if the person really is a brother, meaning he has a love of what is good, then the truth will provide him with a grasp of what was wrong and how to change (see AC 9088:2; AE 746:15).

This does not mean that when we first describe the wrong to someone that person will welcome the news. Would we? It is very difficult to hear that we have a problem. At first there often is denial, so the Lord suggests taking others to speak with the person. This could be done in some situations. But the point is that major change does not occur suddenly, so it takes many confirmations for the knowledge to firmly take hold. Married couples can be working on aspects of their relationship for long periods of time before changes occur. It takes repeated experiences of pain and reconciliation for behaviors to permanently change (which is one of the values of thinking of marriage as an eternally evolving relationship).

The goal is, of course, to regain one's brother--to have peaceful relationships with others. But this goal cannot always be met. Reconciliation will not always produce harmony. This the Lord recognizes, for if someone refuses to listen, He said, "let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector" (Matt. 18:17). To be a heathen or tax collector was to be repulsive, to be avoided at all costs.

Where efforts to work out differences fail, and when it is possible to avoid the person, it is a wise course to follow. When the Lord was traveling to Jerusalem, a Samaritan village refused to receive Him. The disciples James and John were angered and wanted fire to rain down upon them. But the Lord rebuked them, and they went to another village (see Luke 9:51-56).

We cannot get along with everyone. In the Lord's house there are many mansions. Different personalities, attitudes, and values cause spiritual distance to occur. Charity is sometimes exercised by avoiding people with whom full reconciliation is not possible.

This does not mean that we turn away in anger or judgment. The Lord said, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those

who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). Love, bless, do good to, and pray for--quite a challenge! We cannot change others but we can control how we think of them--we can change ourselves. Regardless of the wrong others may do to us, we cannot let them be the cause of the growth of hell within us. When we hate in response, we harm only ourselves. The heavenly state to which the Lord is leading is far removed from such feelings, for the doctrines of the New Church state that angels "are in the continual desire of doing good to others, because this is the delight of their life; and therefore as soon as there is any opportunity, they do good both to foes and to friends ... " (AC 8223:2).

To be reconciled with others means to allow the Lord to bring peace into our lives. If we always remember that there is good in others, even if we do not see it, we cannot be harmed by their actions (see AE 644:23). If we strive to feel love for others, wish blessings for them, look for what good we may do, and above all, pray for them, then there is no conflict between us and what is good. For we will not be able to hate or stay angry if we sincerely pray for the good of others.

Then we will be reconciled with the good in our brothers. Then there will be no cause for hard feelings or vengeful actions. Then we can return to the altar. We can raise up our gifts, our hearts and minds, and they will be acceptable to the Lord. Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 5:38-48, Luke 9:51-56, AC 9088:2