



Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*; oil on canvas, 1670

[Biblical Resources for Reconciling: Luke 15:11-32](#)

The Fourfold Ministry: Welcome, Acceptance, Hospitality, and Reconciliation

Reconciling Ministry is a Fourfold Commitment.

Let's not think there is no estrangement that needs reconciling. To accept responsibility (response-ability) doesn't mean to accept guilt for a breach or collapse of relationships. It means to accept the ministry of building bridges and repairing breaches *anyway*.

Millions of people are estranged today in our society. Half of all marriages crumble. People are suspicious of foreigners. Our courts are filled with lawsuits brought by angry parties. Guns sales are brisk.

Even more, the world is full of ex-Baptists, ex-Catholics, ex-Lutherans, and ex-Christians. Enormous numbers of people are disaffected, hurt, estranged or completely alienated—from one another and from the Christian faith. Some are angry and filled with hate toward religions, one and all.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

—Luke 15:1-2

And among them are "sexual minority" persons, who may have heard that love is preached but only felt hatred in practice. Most often, they have not stayed around long enough to experience anything but the rejection. They may never have experienced the love of Christ in a Christian community.

A Reconciling Ministry in a Christian congregation starts with a simple commitment that no one deserves to be lost or abandoned to such isolation, violence, verbal abuse, homelessness, disease, HIV, or self-hatred. We may not be able to un-do the history of alienation or rejection, but we can chart a future in which people are received and respected, nurtured and healed.

Luke introduces the parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son with the observation that Jesus kept company with lost people.

Reconciling means to offer a new relationship where it is either damaged or impossible unless someone steps forward to say, "Let's make this relationship better. Let's make this work. For the love of God, let's begin again."

Saying "Welcome" is just the first sign of a four-fold commitment that moves a Reconciling Ministry forward. We find a complete model and framework of the Reconciling in Christ Program in Luke 15, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Here are **welcome, acceptance, hospitality and reconciliation**.

Welcome

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion.

There is a longing on the part of God that the child comes home. God is always there, watching and waiting, ready to receive those who are coming home. If the Church means to wait with God, then Welcome means anticipation, readiness and patience, hoping that those who are estranged will come home and not find our gates shut to them.

No matter what the original cause or source of alienation might have been, Christians never close the door or shut the gate on someone who desires to come home. "Welcome" is truly an unconditional gesture.

Acceptance

He ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

There is recognition of the "lost son" coming home—not as a stranger but as a child of the family who belongs here. God sets no requirement for the one who returns, such as a lower status, or conditional love, no repatriation, no probationary period nor purgatory. God is not even interested in the quality or thoroughness of our repentance speeches. God's word for all is always an invitation, not an ultimatum.

If the Church means to proclaim God's acceptance, it needs to remove its own road blocks, conditions and hedges. Most of all, it needs to see anyone who comes home as part of the family, not as a stranger or an alien to God or to the family.

Hospitality

'Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!'

In the story, there is unconditional, even prodigal hospitality, a fabulous party!

The word "prodigal" has stuck to this parable. In Webster's dictionary, the second meaning given, after "reckless wastefulness" (the younger son?) is "abundant generosity or liberality; lavishness."

The parable is about God, so the best title might be "The Parable of the Prodigal Father." If the son was reckless or wasteful with his inheritance, the father is even more reckless and lavish—a reminder that no matter how abundant are our sins, God's grace is even more abundant.

Too often, the Church's implicit message, to a newcomer or someone who comes back after a long absence, is a nonchalant "take it or leave it!" But if the Church truly means to imitate God's generous hospitality, it can do much more than to say "everybody welcome" and ignore those who come seeking God's lavish and generous love.

Reconciliation

'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'

Finally, the parable portrays the strong desire for reconciling between brothers to complete the reconciliation which the Father began with each son. In the parable, the Father says to the Elder, "Son, it is fitting..., it is right,... We have to celebrate and rejoice."

If the Church intends to live out God's desire for reconciliation, it should seek all means possible to end estrangement, to set aside its resentments and its self-righteous pride. The homework assignment which God gives to the church is to keep on reconciling brothers and sisters.

Two things are quite clear from this beloved parable of Jesus:

The father is generous, lavish, waiting and longing for his own to return. He is ready to love without question, uninterested in our groveling but interested in welcoming home all who had been lost.

Our faith is perfected in discipleship when we accept the ministry of reconciling with the brothers and sisters we had thought were beyond God's reach.

Can there be any doubt that it is God's loving will for all his children to come to their senses, come home, accept his lavish grace, and honor his prodigality for each of us by imitating that love in our welcome, acceptance, hospitality and reconciliation with everyone else who comes to him?

The parable which Jesus told ends without the brothers ever talking face to face, or reconciling with each other. This doesn't mean such a step is unnecessary. Jesus leaves this step to his disciples—to us! We have to imagine the meeting of the brothers, and it will help us imagine how we will build reconciling bridges with those who have felt estranged, distanced, or alienated.

Reconciliation is not scripted in this parable. In our common life, it will take many forms, including deep listening, apologizing and forgiving, and even silence in order to let others "let off steam." But the ministry of reconciling does not give up because it is grounded in the conviction that reconciling is God's will; it is holy work; it is redemptive.



Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*; etching, 1636

Questions for Discussion:

- Are we aware of people in our congregation and our community who may feel estrangement? Have we listened to their stories, to understand the source of alienation or the stories of pain they have lived through?
- Is God more forgiving than people are? How does our withholding of forgiveness of others affect our relationship to God?
- How does forgiveness of past events, words or actions change the dynamics of a relationship?
- Can entire groups of people feel alienation or estrangement?
- What role does “blame” or “fault” play in maintaining old hurts and pains?
- What is the difference between conditional love and unconditional love? Are there conditions that always pertain to reconciliation?
- What specific things could our congregation do to announce reconciliation to the surrounding community? How does a church proclaim the Good News of reconciliation?

For further reflection:

"Art for the Heart," a feature exploring the story of the Prodigal Son through the interpretation of numerous artists, was published in *The Lutheran* magazine in 1998. The artworks are viewable on line at <http://www.thelutheran.org/9803/page7.html>.

A contemporary chancel drama which imagines the meeting of two estranged brothers when the younger one suddenly comes home is available from Dan Hooper.