

BEYOND WELCOME:

WHY IS THERE A NEED FOR RECONCILIATION?

An examination of the Parable of the Prodigal, Luke 15

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From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. —2 Corinthians 5:16-21

I was speaking a few weeks ago with the Program Executive for Lutherans Concerned/North America, Mr. Bob Gibeling. He reported to me one of the obstacles that he runs into when talking about Reconciling in Christ. Some congregations, he said, don't feel like they have any "reconciling" to do.

They "don't get it," I thought. The don't really have the vision that we have, or there's a blockage, a stumbling block. But, I thought, we have a task to help them "get it," because actual reconciling work is important.

Since its beginning, the Reconciling Movement and the RIC Program of Lutherans Concerned has primarily stressed the "welcoming" of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people into the church. Our flagship instrument is an Affirmation of Welcome which explicitly names GLBT people.

Yet some congregations, after having adopted an Affirmation, and getting a nice certificate from LC/NA "suitable for framing" have simply forgotten all about their offer of welcome and hospitality. Or, it has never taken root at a deeper level.

I am posing several related questions here:

- What does it mean to stress reconciliation alongside hospitality?
- Is it important for GLBT people?
- Or, is just a hello and "come on in" enough for GLBT people to understand that the terms of endearment have changed for the better?

When Lutherans Concerned speaks of reconciliation (meaning, *beyond welcome*), we aren't implying that they personally have done things so awful to the gay/lesbian community. Few people expect white Americans, or *any* Americans living today to feel direct or personal guilt for slavery 150 years ago. Groups and communities and individuals don't want to be tarred with the brush of racism or sexism where they feel they don't have any direct responsibility or guilt. The bottom line is, we aren't in the business of peddling guilt, but of encouraging reconciliation.

But, the fact is, thousands and even millions of people are estranged. The world is full

of ex-Baptists, ex-Catholics, ex-Lutherans, ex-Christians. Enormous numbers of people are disaffected, hurt, estranged or completely alienated.

And sadly, the *only* Christian message that the gay and lesbian community is hearing is, “You are going to hell. God hates fags.” Having never heard about grace, and only heard about judgment, gay and lesbian people are profoundly estranged from the church. Perhaps it’s a corporate thing, and while it is no one group or individual’s fault, or sin, it still needs to be changed.

Consider some of these startling and scary facts:

- Isolation: 80% of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth report severe isolation problems. They experience social isolation, emotional isolation and cognitive isolation.
- Issues in School: 97% of students in public high schools report regularly hearing homophobic remarks from their peers. 53% of students report hearing homophobic comments made by school staff. 28% of gay and lesbian high school students in a national study were seen to have dropped out of school because of harassment resulting from their sexual orientation.
- Violence: 45% of gay males and 20% of lesbians report having experienced verbal harassment and/or physical violence as a result of their sexual orientation during high school.
- Homelessness: 26% of gay and lesbian youth are forced to leave home because of conflicts with their families over their sexual identities.
- Health Issues: 68% of adolescent gay males use alcohol and 44% use other drugs; 83% of lesbians use alcohol and 56% use other drugs.
- HIV/AIDS: Approximately 20% of all persons with AIDS are 20-29 years old; given the long latency period between infection and the onset of the disease, many were probably infected as teenagers.
- Depression: In a study of depression and gay youth, researchers found depression strikes homosexual youth four to five times more severely than their non-gay peers.
- Suicide: A 1989 study by the US Department of Health and Human Services showed gay and lesbian youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual young people. 30% of the completed youth suicides are committed by lesbian and gay youth annually and suicide is their leading cause of death.

Let’s not make the mistake of saying there is no estrangement out there that needs reconciling. To take responsibility (or response-ability) doesn’t mean to accept guilt for the breach or damage or collapse of relationships, but to accept the ministry of building the bridges and repairing the breaches *anyway*.

Reconciling starts with the simply agreement that no person deserves to be *lost* to such isolation, violence, verbal abuse, drop-out and homelessness, disease, HIV and suicide. And somehow it seems so much more urgent when that person is so young.

Reconciling means to offer a new relationship where it is either damaged, or was impossible *unless one side* steps forward and says, *Let’s make this relationship better. Let’s make this work. Let’s forgive and let’s begin again.*

The desire to begin the relationship again sometimes even takes the form of the contrition and forgiveness being spoken and pronounced by people who were not originally parties to the estrangement or breach. We have seen this in recent history when Pope John Paul II acknowledged the sins of the Catholic Church down through history. Or when the United States finally acknowledged its sins against Japanese Americans in World War II and started a process of reparations.

This is exactly what the scripture proclaims with the unilateral action of God. While we were still in our sins, God was in Christ, reconciling. God reconciled the world to himself. He took the initiative. Again, the central verses of the text from 2 Corinthians 5:

¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we treat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Perhaps the most suitable Bible passage for understanding this principle of taking the initiative in reconciling work is looking again at the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. As you know well, the parable has two parts, the first happy and joyous, the second painful and embarrassing. The Father and the Younger Brother are reconciling.

¹¹ Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’

²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe — the best one — and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’

³¹ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² 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.’”

Now, before we go into this, I need to state one important disclaimer. There is nothing in this parable to suggest that the Younger Son was gay, or that he went off to a far country and immersed himself in a “homosexual lifestyle.” It was pointed out to me recently how different is the experience of gay or lesbian people who have left the church: they didn’t voluntarily pack up and

leave; in many cases they were kicked out or told not to bother to come back. In fact, they were told that the inheritance promised to the children of God would never be theirs.

To me, what's notable here is that the Older Brother did not recognize any need for reconciliation, but focused only on the dynamic of brother and father in reference to obedience and his own *not-stepping-out-of-line*. The older brother apparently didn't recognize that a profound reconciliation had taken place between the father and the son on the road home. He was not yet ready to understand how and why he needed to reconcile himself with his younger brother—or to face the resentment he had been carrying against his father for so long. In fact, he inadvertently admits to the estrangement between him and his younger brother when he refers to him as “this son of yours.” In other words, “He's no brother of mine; he's your son!”

But the parable is *not* about you, Older Brother. It's about the reconciling work of God (the Father figure), who reconciled himself to the younger son simply by his declaration of the son's welcome home, and by his declaration *to the older son* of his reconciling with the younger son.

Now, it's appropriate to ask, *Why does the parable stop here, without telling us whether the two brothers ever made up?* I want to suggest two reasons:

First, because the parable isn't about the brothers, it's about the Father.

Second, because whether or not the two brothers reconcile *is their work*. The Scriptures *announce* the reconciliation of God with humanity; they speak all the necessary rationale and concepts we need. But the Scriptures do not do the homework for the church. It is our task now. And how the circle is drawn to define who is brother or sister, and where reconciling needs to happen, is our ministry.

RELATIONSHIPS

We might also look deeper at who these figures are in the telling of the story by Jesus and the early church. The identity of the Father is easy: it is God the Father. (Please note I am not intending to be politically incorrect about the gender of God; I will come back to this issue.)

But who are the brothers? Does the younger brother simply symbolize Sinner John Doe—a theological “Everyman”? Possibly. And the older brother, is he a self-righteous “Every-Other-Man”? In other words, are these “types” of human beings, the naughty and nice, the prodigal and the frugal? The people who are getting older but refuse to grow up over against the brothers and sisters of Perpetual Responsibility?

Jesus may have been characterizing the Older Brother as the Jewish people itself—the Chosen People, the people of the promise, who first heard the word of God. The Younger Brother then serves as the Gentile, the pagans wallowing in sin, who have willfully wandered away from God. (Our clue, as you know is that the Younger Son is hanging out with pigs, which to faithful Jews were unclean and downright disgusting.)

Or perhaps Jesus may have had in mind that the older brothers were the Scribes and Pharisees: self-designated classes of Jews who kept the law scrupulously and who looked down on those who didn't. We now know that first-century Judaism was profoundly divided between sects or parties who disagreed with each other. And we know from many places in the Gospels that Jesus “beats up” these Pharisees over and over for missing the point, for binding loads on others that they themselves cannot carry, etc.

In the grand battle of religion between the strict and lax, Jesus does not side with the strict very often, and when he does he seems to put a different twist or torque upon what was always thought of as the right or orthodox strictness, so as to show how it has missed the point.

To the early church, this dynamic may have broadened to Older Brothers being the

“Judaizers” and the Younger Brothers being those who converted to Christ but *not* to Judaism. These are the ones for whom Paul is the apostle of grace, who argued against Peter that it wasn’t necessary for the Gentiles to accept circumcision in order to be saved. And Paul continued to argue forcefully with Jewish Christians of his day that the keeping of the Law of Moses has no bearing on our reconciliation with God, and may even be *contrary* to the Gospel.

I think we are in a similar position now, with regard to gay and lesbian people in the church. Those voices within the church who would make the “welcome” of GLBT people conditional upon “keeping the whole law”—including the Old Testament Law—are in the shoes of the “Judaizers.”—those who believe that the reason the country is falling apart is because we are not sticking scrupulously to our traditional values; those Christians who have set themselves up as judges and attorneys of the Law, *insisting that the Law trumps the Gospel*.

And those voices within the church who stress grace and acceptance are not attempting to bind a load on gay and lesbian people which they themselves cannot carry. They are saying, “We do not demand lifelong celibacy of heterosexuals; how can we demand this of homosexuals?” They are saying, “We do not demand a literal interpretation of the Bible, for example, when it comes to divorce and remarriage, or the ordination of women, and other issues. How can we demand that the Bible must be interpreted literally when it comes to homosexuality?”

To summarize, in this parable: the Older Brother, the self-righteous brother:

- (a) is in a state of disbelief that the Father (God) would welcome back the worthless younger brother.
- (b) does not want to reconcile with the younger brother by going into the feast and celebration; and will not offer an Affirmation of Welcome.
- (c) (mis)understands his whole relationship with the Father as being based on his perfect obedience to the Father “all these years,” without reward.

But note: God the Father’s response here is *not* to reject the Older Son’s understanding but to correct it: that, Son, “you have always been in my good graces for the same reason your younger brother is now, *because I am gracious and loving*. You are not on my good side because you earned it, but *because I give you my unconditional love*.”

The Father does not reject the Old Brother’s faithfulness, obedience or goodness, but he makes clear *they have no bearing on the relationship of Father and Son*. The relationship is a reconciling one because of the Father’s unconditional love.

So it is clear that the Father also does not reject the Younger Son for his faithlessness, disobedience or badness. Nor does he stress, in fact *does not even acknowledge*, the son’s repentance or willingness to live in a second-class status within the household. *They, too, have no bearing on the relationship of Father and Son*.

ONE MORE RELATIONSHIP

Where then is the Mother? This is a fun question, but I do not mean to ask it simply for comic relief. We always like to have Ozzie and Harriet-type families, since it all seems so wholesome! So somewhere in our minds we tend to ask, well, where is the mother in all this?

But this story *is not about* nuclear families at all but about God and his relationship to his children. *There is simply no mother in this equation. Why?* Human beings seem to need it. There is always talk that Christian teaching has so masculinized God that *it needs* the metaphors of Mother to feminize it so that human beings can relate to the faith.

Lutherans and other Protestants, of course, took the Virgin Mary off the pedestal 500 years ago, yet sometimes go along with an old Roman Catholic tradition of referring to the Church as “Mother Church.” It seems to satisfy *our* need (not God’s need) to recast the divine economy in terms of human model: God our Father, Mother Church, and all the children. How familial and familiar. How sweet.

But there is an internal problem with this theology, which Jesus completely eliminates by not mentioning a mother.

In the Ozzie and Harriet television series, do you remember what Ozzie did for a living? No one does. He always seemed to be around, never went off to work. This is one clue that it wasn’t the real world. Ozzie was never absent.

We know from personal experience that, unlike Ozzie and Harriet, in the *real* world many fathers in traditional families were absent—off winning the bread or bringing home the bacon—and mothers were home all day with the kids. (This was of course before both parents went off to work and created “latch key” kids.)

When the kids were disobedient, it was the mother who was the first line of discipline. If things were bad enough, mother would make sure that mother and father would be in agreement about the discipline, control or punishment of the child. Over time, this becomes a kind of proleptic punishment, one that foresees dire consequences. The threat itself becomes a serious, final and inescapable punishment. “Just wait until your Father hears about this. You are in trouble, little man. You are in VERY BIG TROUBLE, and you will be punished most certainly. Just wait until your Father comes.” In the Father’s absence, the Mother’s power grows exponentially, so that the child understands that there will be no “wigggle room” when Father finally comes.

Webster’s defines *prolepsis* as “the treating of a future event as if it had already happened.”

“Mother Church” has become the Grand Dame of this kind of discipline. In Christian teaching, the Judgment Day is still in the future, when Christ returns; it has not occurred yet, but often Mother Church has already handed down proleptic punishment of some of her children, based on the absolutely certainty that Father God will *back her up*, that in effect the disobedient sinner, the heretic, the apostate, and the homosexual will burn in hell for their transgressions, or in the case of lesser sins for Roman Catholics, at least wind up in purgatory for aeons before they work off their disobedience.

The medieval centuries of course say Mother Church combine her proleptic punishment in lieu of Father’s return, with civil authority, so that disobedience sinners, witches, apostate, heretic and homosexual could be burned at the stake *now*. Why wait for Father God to come and carry out judgment. At the height of the medieval Church’s persecution of homosexuals, incidentally, they were burned *as fags* for being heretics, because it was imputed to them that they did not believe the correct doctrine by insisting that it wasn’t a sin to love someone.

While Catholic rhetoric has certainly toned down in recent centuries—especially since it lost civil and temporal authority¹ to emerging democracies—speaking far less with dire threats of proleptic punishment, either with Hell or Purgatory in mind, it is *Evangelical Protestantism*—sensing

¹ The Confession of Sins used for generations of penitents in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod is much more comprehensive than anything uttered by the Prodigal Son, and reflects an attitude that the punishment of God need not await the final judgment day: “O Almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserved Thy *temporal* and eternal punishment. . . .” (St. Louis, The Lutheran Hymnal, 1941, p. 16) [*emphasis added*].

an authority vacuum in American culture—which has picked this up and played the tune with more variations.

“God Hates Fags,” the mantra of the Rev. Fred Phelps, comes to mind. Phelps, in the role of Mother Church, is so certain that Father God will back up his personal opinions about the worthlessness of homosexuals, that he attends the funerals of those who have died of AIDS. A year ago, he and his forces picketed the ordination of Pastor Anita Hill to the Lutheran ministry, while four bishops were inside ordaining her, so Phelps is playing Mother Church in announcing proleptic judgment upon the ELCA and the Church of Sweden.

Right next to Phelps are Revs. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who proleptically announced the judgment of God on *America*—for permitting gays, lesbians, feminists and the ACLU to have a life—to explain why Muslim fanatics attacked America on September 11. Fred Phelps’ son, incidentally, who is an attorney, has apparently said that God caused the September 11 disasters to punish America for accepting homosexuals!

Meanwhile, back in Luke chapter 15, where is the Mother figure which is on a par with Father God? Where is Mother Church, *mediating* the word and judgments of an absentee God? Where is the Mother figure warning the Younger Brother at the gate, “Just wait until your Father comes!”

There is no mother figure in these parables *because* the parables are not about the paradigm of Christian family life. They are about God and his relationship with his children. *There is no intermediary*. There is no role to play to intercept and deflect the grace and promises of God, the unconditional love of God, before the Father God can pronounce them, or put qualifiers around or in front of them.

The parable as it stands, simple and clean, says that God welcomes his child home *simply because the child came home*. There is no other authoritative voice saying, “BUT.... don’t do this again”, or “you will have to work you way back into my trust,” or “you must make a promise that you will never again indulge in loose living.” There is no satisfaction for sins, there is no point acknowledged about satisfactory repentance, there are no terms. There is *no sign* of God’s wrath or anger at all. There is no temporal punishment.

In other words, if the prodigal child comes “home” to the Church, does that prodigal—who has come to his or her senses and said, “I will up and go to my Father”—*first met* by the love and grace of God, or the intermediation of the Church who says, “you can’t come in, until you have made satisfaction for your sins, or groveled and begged”?

Moms and dads know that they must see eye-to-eye about discipline, limits, restraint and punishment when it comes to raising children. The dysfunctionality with the church, when it tries to be Mother Church, is that it has historically and dangerously invented both sins and punishments which God the Father does not set. It has controlled the gates to the means of grace, to the Scriptures, to ordination, to forgiveness and reconciliation, to create an entire industry which comes between the Father and the children. Now, when the Prodigal comes to the gate, he or she doesn’t immediately receive the unmediated embrace of the Father, but runs into the conditions and barriers which Mother Church has set up.

None of this is there in the parable of the Prodigal. But in fact what *we* do find is all the structure and framework of the Reconciling in Christ Program: welcome, acceptance, hospitality and reconciliation.

1. **Welcome.** There is a longing on the part of God that his child comes home. *God is always there, one foot out on the road, watching and waiting, running toward us.*

2. **Acceptance.** There is *recognition* of the lost son, coming home. There is no requirement

of a lower status for the returning son: no repatriation, no probationary period nor purgatory. God is not even interested in the quality or thoroughness of our repentance speeches.

3. **Hospitality.** There is unconditional welcome, and *prodigal* hospitality. The word “prodigal”, incidentally, has stuck to this parable. Webster’s second meaning here, after “reckless wastefulness” (the younger Son?) is “abundant generosity or liberality; lavishness.” The parable, I keep saying, *is about God*, so the correct title should be “The Parable of the Prodigal Father.”

5. **Reconciliation.** There is a strong desire for reconciling between brothers *to complete the reconciliation of Father and each son*. And the parable ends there, with the desire expressed and the “homework” left to the brothers.

In conclusion, I want to stress that the Prodigal Son is not a model, but a parable about God’s unfettered, unmediated love. And even as far as it goes, because of traditional misunderstanding, it shouldn’t suggest that the “family” model is useful in the long run. We get into trouble when we insist that God is a Father. We get into trouble when we let the Church become a Mother instead of a community of the faithful. And we infantilize the moral and theological process when we think of the members of the church as “the children.”

I have never been a strong advocate of non-gender-specific language about God, as if women cannot relate to a God always described in male terms. Today’s politically correct view that rejects sexism is nothing new. There is evidence in the writings of the Cappodocian Fathers in the Fourth Century, that the better theologians knew perfectly well that God is not masculine.²

But it in this analysis that I finally saw the need to gently move the church on down the road, away from this patriarchy and matriarchy. It has created a cartoon Deity in a Dysfunctional Divine Family, with an indulgent but absent Heavenly Father intercepted by over-controlling Mother Church. Worse, it trivializes God’s unconditional love as much as it trivializes the full participation of women by supposing that they may be content with a Virgin Mother as a model, a poster child of all nice little girls, and a Mother Church, serene but psychotic, who arrests her daughters’ development with the nagging fear that she has not parented them strongly enough.

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

The father is generous, lavish, waiting and longing for his own, ready to love without question, and far less interested in our confession than in welcoming home all who had been lost.

Our faith is perfected in discipleship when we accept the ministry of reconciling with 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 people to come to their senses, come home, accept God’s lavish grace? Can there be any doubt that we honor God’s prodigality toward everyone by imitating divine love in our welcome, acceptance, hospitality and reconciliation with anyone who comes to him?



² See Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christ God-Language* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995).