

## BEYOND WELCOME:

### WHY IS THERE A NEED FOR “RECONCILIATION”?

A re-examination of Luke 15

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Since 1988, I have belonged to one of the *reconciling* or *welcoming* churches, now numbering well more than 1,000 Protestant congregations, which expressly invite gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons into their fellowship. Numerous denominationally-oriented programs exist. In the Lutheran tradition, the Reconciling in Christ Program of Lutherans Concerned/North America, is thriving, and claims to be adding about one congregation per week in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

Recently, I was speaking with the Program Executive for Lutherans Concerned/North America, Mr. Bob Gibeling, who lives and works out of Atlanta. He reported to me one of the obstacles that he runs into when talking about Reconciling in Christ across the church. Some congregations, he said, don't feel like they have any "reconciling" to do. "They don't get it," he sighed.

Some congregations have taken a first step, which is to publicly welcome LGBT Christians to participate in their congregational life. Other churches—very often speaking through their clergy—insist that LGBT people *do not need any special form of welcome* (echoing the secular suspicion of a perceived "gay agenda" by resisting any form of "special rights"). "Everybody is welcome," is the all-sufficient refrain, painted on church signs, written into phone book listings and local newspaper advertisements.

They "don't get it," I agreed. They 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 the next, important, even critical, step. Even for those congregations who have proclaimed that LGBT persons are welcome, the deeper concept of reconciling seems to be left out of their mission statements.

Patterned on the Methodist program which also began in 1984, the Lutheran 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 product is an "Affirmation of Welcome" which explicitly names Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender people. Yet some congregations—after having adopted an Affirmation, and receiving a nice certificate "suitable for framing"—have simply forgotten all about their offer of welcome and hospitality. I suspect that is because it has never taken root at a deeper level, at the level of the Gospel and our Christian mission.

I am posing several related questions here:

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

When we speak of "reconciliation" (meaning, *beyond* "welcome"), we aren't implying that churches or their members personally have done things so awful to the gay/lesbian community. After all, few people expect Americans living today to feel direct or personal guilt for slavery 150 years ago. I feel no personal responsibility for the terrible wrongs committed against Japanese-Americans who were sent to internment camps soon after Pearl Harbor. I wasn't alive then. Most individuals, groups, and communities refuse to be tarred with the brush of prejudice, racism or sexism where they feel they sense no direct involvement, responsibility or guilt.

But the bottom line is, the reconciling ministries aren't in the business of placing blame or peddling guilt, but of encouraging reconciliation. **The undeniable fact is, thousands and even millions of people are estranged.** The world is full of ex-Baptists, "lapsed" or "collapsed" Catholics, former Lutherans—ex-Christians of all flavors. Enormous numbers of people are disaffected, hurt, estranged or completely alienated. Some are fiercely angry and filled with hate toward religions, one and all.

And *some* of these are "sexual minorities" persons.

Sadly, the *loudest* Christian message that the gay and lesbian community is hearing pronounces "You are going to hell," and "God hates fags." Having never heard much about grace, and with vivid recollection of judgment, a huge number of gay and lesbian people are profoundly estranged from the church. 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 that there is no estrangement out there that needs reconciling. To take response-ability doesn't mean to determine blame or accept guilt for the collapse of relationships, but to accept the ministry of building bridges and repairing breaches *anyway*.

Reconciling starts with the simply agreement that *no* person deserves to be lost or abandoned 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 rebuild the relationship. Let's make this work. 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, as part of the church's Jubilee Year 2000. Or when the United States government

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 from this morning's devotions:

<sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup>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.

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.

<sup>11</sup> Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> 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! <sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" "

<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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.' <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup> He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup> Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

<sup>31</sup> Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> 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 by a lay member of Hope Lutheran Church, who is also a member of this chapter, 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.

What is 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 younger brother on the road home. He was not yet ready to understand how and why *he* needed to reconcile himself with his 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 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.

I also want to 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: he represents 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.

**Relationships.** 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 reckless and the conservative? 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 would be the Gentile, the pagans wallowing in sin, who have willfully wandered away from God. (The 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 the slacker, 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 had 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 with its labyrinth of laws. 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.

**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 LGBT people conditional upon “keeping the whole law”—including the Old Testament Law—are in the role of the “Judaizers”—those who believe that the reason this 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 the Prodigal 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* 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 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 pitiful speech, his repentance or willingness to live in a second-class status within the household, as a slave or servant. *These, 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 ask it simply for comic relief. We always like to imagine 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 a mother figure. There is always talk that Christian teaching so masculinized God that *it needs* the metaphors of Mother to feminize it, so that human beings can relate to it.

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 a huge 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 mother was 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 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 (or little lady). 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 “wiggle room” with 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, what I call “proleptic punishment.” 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 to 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 saw Mother Church combine her proleptic punishment—in lieu of Father's return—with civil authority, so that disobedient sinners, witches, apostate, heretic and homosexual could be *burned at the stake*, punished *right 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 of the same gender.

It is interesting that while the Catholic rhetoric has certainly toned down in recent centuries—especially since it lost its civil authority to emerging democracies—speaking far less with dire threats of proleptic punishment with Hell or Purgatory in mind, it is now *Evangelical Protestantism*—sensing 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 in St. Paul, Minnesota, he and his forces picketed the ordination of Anita Carol 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. God *allowed* the September 11 attacks, in part, to punish America for accepting homosexuals!

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 model Christian family life. They are about God and his relationship with his children.

***There is no intermediary***, whether for good or for ill. There is no role to intercept the grace and promises of God, the unconditional love of God—before the Father God can pronounce them—or bracket them with qualifiers.

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 your 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.

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

When it comes to raising children, moms and dads know that they must see eye-to-eye about discipline, limits and punishment. 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 Father God does not set.

Not only has it ignored the ministry of reconciliation, it has unilaterally created alienation. It has controlled the gates to the Means of Grace, to the Scriptures, to Ordination, to Forgiveness and Reconciliation—to create an entire religious “industry” which comes between the Father and the children. Now, when the prodigal one comes to the gate, he or she doesn’t immediately receive the unmediated embrace of the Father, but runs into conditions and barriers and apparatus which Mother Church has set up.

None of this is there in the parable of the Prodigal. But what *is* there?

**There is all the structure and framework, in fact, of a Reconciling Ministry program: There is welcome, acceptance, hospitality and reconciliation.**

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

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, even *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.” Catch this: The parable, remember, *is about God*, so the correct title should be “The Parable of the Prodigal Father.”

4. **Reconciliation.** Finally, there is a strong desire for reconciling between brothers *to complete the reconciliation of Father and each son*. The Father says, “Son, it is fitting..., it is right... We have to celebrate and rejoice.”

And the parable ends there, with the desire expressed and the homework left to the brothers.

I want to stress that the Prodigal Son is not an entire model, but a parable about God’s unfettered, unmediated love. And even as far as it goes, because of pervasive 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 personify the Church as a Mother on a par with the Father, 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 “children.”

I had never been a strong advocate of non-gender-specific language about God, as if women cannot relate to or tolerate a God described in male terms. But today’s “politically correct” view, that rejects sexism, is nothing new. There is evidence in the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers in the Fourth Century, that theologians knew perfectly well that God is not masculine in the sense that creatures are masculine or feminine.

But, it was in this analysis that I finally saw the need to gently move the church 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 are content with a Virgin Mother as a poster child of all nice little girls, and a Mother Church, serene but psychotic, wants to arrest her daughters’ development because of nagging fear that she has not parented them strongly enough.

And it has contributed to present alienation *and* deferred reconciliation. It is really saying that alienation, like sin, is just a fact of life in this imperfect world; and that reconciliation is pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by which must wait for the world to come.

I suggest, **No!** When we take the “cartoon” and the sexism out of the equation (especially the controlling institutionalized Mother and infantilized children), there are only God and humanity.

As in the parable, so in the life of the real church, *not* the dysfunctional family:

- Alienation cannot continue, and it is not acceptable between brothers and sisters in the household of faith.
- Reconciliation is real, it is what is fitting and right, what God intends, and desires.
- How the people of God go about reconciling where there has been such terrible alienation, is left to us as our homework assignment.
- But the prodigality of God surrounds and embraces all!

In fact, the will of the “Father” to rejoice in homecoming, to end alienation, to achieve reconciliation, and to celebrate, *are the “last word.”* There need be no argument whether this is God’s Word for us and for the church. But there should be energetic discussion in the church about how to live out reconciliation.

