Forgiveness 4: A community of Reconciliation, 1 November 2026

Psalm 51:1-17, 2 Corinthians 5:14-21, Matthew 6:9-15

This morning we come to the fourth and final sermon in the series on forgiveness, entitled "A Community of Reconciliation". Nick first put the series together for a Mothers' Union retreat, not for us and St James the Less, but then decided to make it our theme for October.

There are two ways that we can think of a Community of Reconciliation. And the first is as a community of the reconciled, reconciled to God and to one another.

The relationship between God and mankind, between God and us, broke down in the Garden of Eden when Adam (which means 'mankind') and Eve decided to break with God's choices and choose their own path, rule in their own wisdom. And all people – apart from Jesus – have done the same ever since.

It took God, in Jesus, to initiate reconciliation. As we heard *God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them* (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Reconciling the world through individual responses. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*. (2 Corinthians 5:21) The great exchange, so costly for Jesus.

As a result, as Paul writes to the Ephesians (2:14-16), we who are reconciled to God are automatically reconciled to each other, in Christ.

For (Christ Jesus) himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

The two groups that Paul writes about are Jews and Gentiles, traditionally hostile to each other, but it can apply to any Christian groups or individuals who are estranged one from another. Of course, it shouldn't be so because Christ has destroyed the wall of hostility, but we can so easily reconstruct it.

Peter did this when he visited Paul in Antioch and behaved as if the wall was still there, choosing to eat only with Jewish believers, not Gentile ones. Paul had to take him to task over it. (Galatians 2:11-16)

Paul is very hot on unity and reconciliation!

Nick has talked about different forms of forgiveness. Attitudinal forgiveness is an internal decision to forgive and can occur without the forgiven person knowing anything about it. If, for example, our forgiveness is towards a deceased parent. We forgive for our own healing and inner peace.

But there are other situations where forgiveness without reconciliation is incomplete. Reconciliation implies an ongoing broken relationship, a relationship that needs action if it is to be mended. It brings healing and forgiveness to two parties. And it does take two to tango.

There cannot be reconciliation unless both sides of the broken relationship agree to it. One party may choose not to forgive, maybe because they may feel that the other party doesn't deserve it

There may not be outright hostility, although sometimes there is, just someone you avoid so that so as not to face the situation between you. Avoidance then defines the relationship, the status quo, it becomes a permanent wall.

Does it matter? Isn't it just water under the bridge by now? We can move on.

Well, yes it does matter. We are made in the image of God. And just as we are to forgive others as God has forgiven us, so it behoves us to seek to be reconciled to one another just as God sought to be reconciled to us in Christ.

Paul writes in Romans (12:16a, 18) *Live in harmony with one another… If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

That's hard when we have been unjustly hurt by someone else, when they have trampled over our feelings, our opinions, our personal integrity or our sense of self-worth. It is so much easier to justify our sense of aggrievement rather than address the situation.

But what if we want, or decide that we ought, to take steps towards reconciliation.

First we must decide: do we actually want reconciliation? It will be costly. Although being generous with forgiveness or admitting our own contribution to the breakdown is nothing like the cost Jesus paid on the cross to reconcile us to God.

And if we don't want reconciliation where does that leave us in our relationship with God?

Assuming we do want reconciliation how do we go about it? I am surmising here a situation where we have not already done everything humanly and spiritually possible to become reconciled. Although even here maybe we should pray as to whether we ought to have another attempt.

Well, I think we start by looking at ourselves. Paul writes in Romans (12:3) *Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment*. This is good advice. Ask the Spirit's help to do it. If you think about it, most conflicts start with someone thinking more highly of themselves than is justified, of rating their opinions, wants and decisions higher than those of others. We only have to reflect on the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East to see that.

Sadly, we can behave in the same manner. Paul has a different approach: *in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.* (Philippians *2:3b,4)* Really*?*

Well, we have arrived at our sober judgement. The next step is to talk to Father about it. Are there ways in which I have contributed to the dividing wall? Are there things or attitudes that I need to confess? In this context Paul writes *We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God*. Unconfessed sin puts up a wall between us and God.

So, we want reconciliation. We have made a sober judgement of ourselves and confessed where appropriate.

Now we need to look soberly at the other party in the breakdown. This is even harder because we have been hurt by them. We need to ask the Spirit to give us insight into the other person's perspective.

They may have come to the situation with baggage such as a history of being disrespected elsewhere or a hurt at another time with another person, that has coloured their view of how they perceive this situation.

Note, I'm talking about understanding here, of empathy, not of making excuses for them.

Coming to some sort of understanding about the other's vulnerabilities and feelings will go a long way towards starting to wish them well. And wishing them well is a step towards reconciliation. We want it for them just as much as we want it for ourselves. Paul writes (Ephesians 4:32) *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

For reconciliation to take place the wrong must be acknowledged followed by forgiveness. And Jesus made it clear that the onus is on the one who is getting the cold shoulder to take the first step.

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24)

Taking the first step applies even when the *something against you* is entirely unfounded and unjustified. Unfair? Maybe, but that's what Jesus said.

And note, we are to go to them, their territory, not invite them round to our place where they may feel that they have entered the lions' den!

Incidentally, this is the origin of the sharing of the peace in the service of holy communion. It is an expression of Christian harmony between us. Either that or an opportunity to put right a ruptured relationship before we partake of the Lord's Supper.

So, in summary, decide whether you want to attempt to reconcile or not, soberly self-reflect, be compassionate towards the other person, wish them well, approach, acknowledge, forgive and be prepared to be forgiven. Easy, right? Not. But godly.

Being a community of the reconciled is one aspect of “A Community of Reconciliation”. The second is being a community of reconcilers.

(God) has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. (2 Corinthians 5:19b, 20a) Wow! We are as God in this regard.

It is part of our remit as a community of the reconciled to introduce others to the gracious provision that God has made for all mankind to be reconciled to him.

This is an honour, not a chore. We have been given the role of Ambassadors for Christ, both individually and collectively. We have been given the responsibility of representing God, our head of state, just as a UK ambassador represents the UK head of state in a country overseas.

Let us wear that privilege as a badge of honour and seek to fulfil it. Amen

Chris Shaw
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