

Leaving Before the Benediction

Matthew 5:23-24

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

Philadelphia Presbyterian Church

September 26, 2010

It's a beautiful fall Sunday morning as people are gathering for worship. I like watching people as they come to the sanctuary. Here comes a family walking from the parking lot—the children running ahead because they look forward to seeing their friends. People are coming in ones and twos, the men giving their necktie one final adjustment. There are always greetings in the narthex, handshakes and hugs as the church family gathers.

On this particular day Michael Gordon shakes hands with his friend who is ushering that morning; he takes his bulletin, and finds his usual seat. It takes him a few minutes to clear his mind of the clutter. You know how it is: there's business stuff, concerns about the kids, wondering if the Panthers are finally going to win a game—the usual preoccupations.

Michael looks around the sanctuary at his fellow worshippers who are filing in. Many of them he knows pretty well: there's his friend Tom who for six months has been looking for a job with no success, and things are getting desperate. Across the aisle are the Steve and Jean Robertson—they've been having some marital issues and have finally started seeing a counselor; hopefully they will make it. One of the older members has gotten a bad report from the doctor. That's the kind of people who make up a congregation—not people whose lives are all happy-go-lucky and burden-free, but real people with real concerns. They've come together as a church family to worship God.

Michael Gordon settles into his seat, briefly scans over the announcements in the bulletin, then tries to clear his head to get ready for worship. He offers up a silent prayer as the organ prelude plays. But as much as he tries to focus on worship, something is just not right; something keeps nagging at him.

The congregation stands for the opening hymn; it's one of Michael's favorites: "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." But for some reason this morning, Michael doesn't feel especially joyful. Sometimes when he sits down for worship, he feels a calm and peace come over him, but not this morning. Something is eating at him.

As he is singing the hymn, he finds himself thinking back to a conversation he had with one of his employees on Friday, and he gets upset all over again. The conversation had not gone well. Things had gotten heated, and he had said some things he regretted. His natural inclination is just to ignore it and hope it will get better all by itself; why run the risk of making things worse? But that didn't seem to be working.

The hymn is over, and the congregation sits down to pray. But Michael isn't feeling very prayerful. Finally, he leans over to his wife, hands her their offering envelope and whispers, "Here; put this in the offering; I have something I have to do." And with that he gets up and walks out.

Jesus said, "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Jesus spoke these words as a part of his teaching about the destructiveness of anger. We know that. We've all seen how nursing an angry grudge can tear down a relationship. Jesus is calling his followers to do the opposite—to build up relationships, not tear them down. Anything we do that diminishes our relationship with another person Jesus calls sin and says that we are liable to judgment. It is something for which we will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment.

So what are we to do? Jesus says that before you do anything else, go and be reconciled; do it now; do it quickly.

Jesus says, "If you are about to lay your gift at the altar...." What he's talking about is church. If you come to worship.... One of the characteristics of worship is that it throws us together with a bunch of other people. Worship is a corporate act. Worship is not purely an act between you and God. It is also an act of a community. One of the major purposes of corporate worship is to remind us that we are part of a community. We come to church and here find ourselves face to face with other sinners just like us.

So Jesus imagines what it is like when you come to worship God, and gathered there with the community of faith, you remember someone from whom you are estranged. What do you do?

For Jesus, the answer is clear: you drop everything else and do whatever you must do to be reconciled with that person.

Back in Jesus' day, the teachers of the Bible debated about whether or not you should interrupt one duty that you have begun in order to attend to some other duty that you have neglected. And they concluded that the "higher" duty took precedence. So they said that since your highest duty was to God, nothing should interrupt that. So the people listening to Jesus that day assumed that Jesus would say something like, "First offer your gift to God, then go work on that broken relationship."

They must have been shocked when Jesus had a different view of what was required. Jesus seemed to believe that we cannot rightly worship God if we are not right with our brothers and sisters. So even the high calling of worshipping God should be set aside in order to be reconciled with our brother or sister.

"If you come to offer your gift at the altar, and there remember that there is someone who has something against you, go at once and first be reconciled, then come back and offer your gift." First things first. Don't wait for the benediction; leave now. Reconciliation with our brothers and sisters is of utmost importance.

Notice that Jesus says, "someone who has something against you." If you are aware that there is someone who is angry at you, it's on you to initiate the reconciliation. Even if you feel that the other person is just wrong and is angry at you without reason, it's your responsibility—as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus—to work to be reconciled with that person. What is important is building up the relationship with the other, not who is to blame for the estrangement.

Michael Gordon left church that Sunday morning and went to the home of his employee. There was something he had to do. I don't know how the conversation went between Michael Gordon and his employee. I hope Michael understood that the key to

reconciliation is found in forgiveness. It was up to Michael to seek forgiveness for the hurt he had caused, and to offer forgiveness for the wrong that had been done to him. Whenever there is conflict between people, until one of them is willing to seek and to give forgiveness, the conflict and brokenness remains.

In his book, *Rumors of Another World*, Philip Yancey tells a story of the healing, reconciling power of forgiveness.

The story takes place in South Africa. When the years of racist injustice known as apartheid had ended as official state policy, there was much healing that needed to be done if the nation was going to move forward. Nelson Mandela, who had been imprisoned for 27 years under apartheid, was elected president, and in an amazing act, he invited his jailer to join him on the inauguration stand.

One of his first acts as president of South Africa was to appoint Bishop Desmond Tutu to head what was called The Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The rules for the commission were simple: if a policeman or army officer voluntarily faced his accusers, confessed his crime, and fully acknowledged his guilt, he could not be tried and punished for that crime. Some people got angry about the obvious injustice of letting criminals go free, but Mandela insisted that the country needed healing and reconciliation more than it needed justice.

One of the most moving stories that came from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings was about a policeman named van de Broek. He told of how he and other officers had shot and killed an innocent 18-year-old boy, and then eight years later the officers returned to the same house and seized the boy's father and brutally killed him.

The emotions were high in the courtroom as the wife and mother of these two people who had been killed by van de Broek was given a chance to respond. "What do you want from Mr. van de Broek?" the judge asked her. She said she wanted three things: to go to the place where her husband had been killed and gather up some dust to give him a decent burial. Then she said, "Mr. van de Broek took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real.

Spontaneously, someone in the courtroom began singing "Amazing Grace" as the elderly woman made her way to the witness stand where van de Broek was sitting. But Mr. van de Broek did not hear the hymn; he had fainted overwhelmed (Yancey, *Rumors of Another World*, p. 222-224).

Now if forgiveness and reconciliation are possible in a situation like that with the stakes so high and the hurt so deep, surely it is possible for us too.

Let me add one last thought. What this passage does for me is to make me realize how absolutely dependent I am on the grace of God. Despite my best efforts and noblest intentions, I know that there are people with whom a broken relationship may never be fully restored. And I stand under judgment for my failure for that brokenness. What I myself cannot do, I am eternally grateful that God's grace can do. Amen. †