
The Gospel of Repair

Matthew 18:15-20

To start, I'd like to try an interactive exercise. I want you to make both hands free. Now, hold out your left hand, palm up. And I want you to imagine in that hand all of the struggles from this year: loved ones going through difficulties, those that have passed away, other losses you've experienced in life (job, friends, lost opportunities). Hold in that hand your regrets, the things you wish you did or didn't do, your mistakes, the ways you feel you didn't measure up...

Hold all that, now open your other palm. And in that place some gratitude, maybe even appreciation for this beautiful morning, for life itself, for your community, your family, your employment. Hold there moments when you experienced awe, and joy. Now, holding these, bring your palms together and clasp them, and give thanks, because everything you are is made up of those struggles, and as you bring gratitude into all the heartache, hear that God loves you just the way you are.

A poem...

"When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free."

This beautiful poem was written by the late Wendell Berry, who had a way of bringing us from despair into peace in just a few short lines. Wendell Berry was a rural Kentucky farmer, who died this past Monday, at the age 92. He was called “a great champion of the particular and human against impersonal, mechanized social and economic forces.” His writings help us to not look past the small things—like making sure that with all the despair we are holding, we also take time to realize that life is teeming with small, common moments for gratitude, and awe, and joy—That the world will hold for us situations that will keep us up at night in fear and also be a grace that can offer peace, if we’re willing to be present to it. For those of us who love his writing, Wendell Berry helps us not to escape the world with all its trials, but to enter more deeply into it—that going through it, you might gain a better appreciation for life.

He also just had a way with words. I mean, listen to this wisdom:

"It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings."

I mean, so achingly beautiful and so profound at the same time.

We seem to have a diminished capacity of staying with the hard things in life in miss accessing the goodness that lies on the other side. We are hardly an “impeded stream that sings.” Maybe I’m preaching to myself here. I’m thinking about how we shrink back at the trials we have to endure, but also when it comes to building relationships with those around us. Take for instance, how easy it is to sever relationships versus the hard work it takes to create real, meaningful community. You can easily unfollow someone on social media with just a click, you can instantly ghost them or block them indefinitely and be completely unreachable to them, you can just “click your way out” to leave a group chat, you can remove a person from a feed instantaneously.

We have become a swipe-left society in this highly curated and fragile bubble of ours. Severing relationships is so easy. Today's world is geared toward the immediacy of hitting the eject button at the hint of any dissonance or conflict we

might come up against. And let me just say: sometimes it's necessary in relationships to setup a boundary. Putting space between yourself and someone else who is causing you harm may be the healthy and necessary thing to do. It may even be warranted to completely remove their presence in your life altogether. I always have in the back of my mind the wise words of James Baldwin, who said: "We can disagree and still love each other *unless* your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist." Sometimes removing yourself is the bold and even brave thing to do.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus was speaking into the original cancel culture. The early church was taking shape in a societal system built on certainty, status, and ego, but he was seeking to establish a new way of relating to one another. Always, the Jesus Way turns things on its head. Jesus says the slow, inefficient way IS the work of the kingdom. Like a mustard seed. Like yeast working its way through the dough. The way of the world was: "If your brother or sister sins against you," well, you pay them back and make it even. Quid pro quo. "Where two or three are gathered together," there are 6 opinions, 5 disagreements, and 4 church splits. It's not untrue to say that new churches have formed over a disagreement in... carpet color. Or one that I'm thinking of in particular: ...over which refrigerator to purchase.

And Jesus was setting up the conditions for a new community that could be a light to the world: When someone in the community wrongs you, go to them directly and seek reconciliation and hope that they will listen to you. If they won't listen, involve others; if they still refuse, bring it to the community.

. . . Listen, listen again, be present to them, bring others to listen as well.

It's a very specific protocol for a small community learning to not dismiss people at the hint of conflict. The goal here is not punishment and excommunication, but restoration . . . to stay in conflict long enough to be heard and to hear. This is the Gospel of repair.

Why is repair so difficult for us in the first place? Before we can repair relationships, we have to become aware of the things in ourselves—ego, defensiveness, fear, certainty, being right—that make repair difficult.

I love passages like this in the Bible that seem to be giving us a picture into some of the things that were happening in the early Christian community. As a

rule, if it's being addressed so specifically by Jesus or Paul, then it's something that has gotten out of hand and needs very specific attention. It helps us, today, realize that the early church didn't begin with a bunch of angelic beings, but a group of people willing to put in the hard work to undo the usual way of things. This is one of those passages I have to remind myself that we are listening in on an ancient conversation . . . in order to extract what can be relevant for us today. I don't think the point here is to follow their church protocols to the "T" but to be reminded that the Jesus Way is always toward the slow and hard work of repair and restoration. This goes for how we are with one another, but also our relationship with ourselves, and with nature and the planet.

"Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." I have always wondered: What does it mean to be gathered in Jesus's name? I used to think that meant establishing a moment of prayer or gathering for worship . . . or anything to do with being at church at all. But I really think that means: "When even two or three people are committed in humility to seeing and hearing the other" then Christ becomes present in the world.

It's like a superpower we have: To make Christ present as we are present with one another, when we are present with the world, when we stay with the hard things long enough to access the peace on the other side... or as Wendell Berry puts it: To be an impeded river that sings. You get a group of people committed to this and you start to see how a church can be a polyphonic chorus on a hill for a community. By the way, I think this is what it looks like to practice resurrection. Friends, may it be so for us. Amen.