

LIFE TOGETHER SERMON SERIES

Week 7: A Community Of Reconciling Love In A Culture Of Broken Relationships

John 13:34-35, 2 Corinthians 5:16-19 (NKJV)

Many of us know what it feels like- the elephants in the room, the tangible undercurrents, the eyes people give you, or the eyes they don't. It is impossible to go through this life without feeling any relational tension; what more when we do life together in communal proximity for a prolonged period of time.

All of us get offended or offend one another at some point. Sometimes that offense hurts even more when it happens in a church environment or relationship where, borrowing language from Psalm 55, it is not 'an enemy' but a 'companion — someone who took sweet counsel together, and walked to the house of God together. These offenses can lead to broken or strained relationships which hurt deeply.

We recognise from our creation account in Genesis 3 that our propensity towards broken relationships is not novel or plainly due to malicious personalities; instead it is an inevitable aspect of our human condition and experience due to the Fall. In the Fall, man suffered three breakages in relationships:

(1) With God — man leaves the Garden where there was full and eternal communion with Him (v.23), a separating shame enters the human race (v.10);

(2) With Creation — in 'toil' (v.17) and 'thistles' (v.18), creation is now hostile to man and due to his actions, in 'bondage to decay' (Rom. 8:20);

(3) With each other — marital tension (v.16), our insecurities and struggles with our own brokenness harming one another (Cain and Abel, Gen. 4:1-8) produce a vicious cycle down the generations.

In churches, we seem to oscillate between two responses that allow offense to lead to broken relationships:

(1) SPIRITUAL BYPASSING

We dismiss our genuine emotions with spiritual ideas, gloss over our deep hurts and unmet expectations with rhetoric, try our best to genuinely forgive, fail and feel guilty for it.

(2) DISENGAGEMENT (CUT-OFF)

We deem the other person as intrinsically harmful, draw separating lines, and allow them to drift away until they are no longer part of our social worlds.

WHERE DID WE LEARN TO CUT PEOPLE OFF?

Our culture subtly permeates our response to offense in the church. It teaches us to *'cut toxic people off for our wellness'*. A product of self-help culture and the clean-living movement, we have learned to classify people who have offended us as inherently harmful and incapable of change; and to get rid of them the same way we would get rid of 'toxic' things in our body and lifestyle.

HOW DOES JESUS CALL US TO RESPOND? (John 13:33-35)

Surrounded by dysfunctional disciples, amongst whom were those who would oppose Him, disobey Him, misrepresent Him and ultimately betray Him, Jesus gave us a vision for reconciling love in one of His final instructions.

He redefined our relationships to one another as family in a new covenant with His new commandment: Love one another; as I have loved you (v.34). Jesus called us to have stubbornly loyal relationships and pursue reconciliation with love that is 'ready to die for each other' (Tertullian) — the same way He chose to die for all and forgave in the midst of offense; in doing so, showing our surrounding society that we are His disciples (v.35).

2 POSTURES FOR RECONCILIATION (2 Corinthians 5:16-19)

(1) We need to look people in the eye

Sometimes we can't stand to look people in the eye when we are offended by them because we don't want to see them wholly as they are. We would rather deal with the caricatures we imagine them to be — exaggerated aspects of them we are offended with. 2 Corinthians 5:16 commends us to 'regard no one according to the flesh' but see them how God does through the Spirit. Paul, used to regard Christ as a religious deviant, a leader worthy of crucifixion with followers worthy to be stoned. This changed drastically when he saw Him in the Spirit. We are admonished to humanise those we are offended by and do the same; regard them how God does.

(2) We need to keep our hands open

Christ hung on the Cross with hands open towards us. His posture was one of reconciliation — forgiving and dying for us while we were all still undeserving enemies of God (Rom. 5:10). His desire is to reconcile all things to Himself (Col 1:19-20) in the last Day where He returns. All relationships that were broken in the Fall will be renewed in that final consummation (Rev. 21:4). We are to keep our hands open in hopes of reconciliation of our relationships. The word

reconciliation means 'to be friends again'. This does not necessarily mean relationships being restored to their original likeness but beckons us to seek the Lord and await His timing in how He wants our relationships restored.

IMPORTANT: There are irrefutable situations of abuse, dysfunction or pain where distance, periods of non-communication, boundaries and even professional or legal help and intervention are absolutely necessary and are the healthy thing to do.

That being said, our ultimate posture must be one of reconciling love at the end of the day. By persevering, we prevent the break in relationship from being total. This posture of reconciliation is not outcome-driven but obedience-driven in the direction of our maturity as disciples of Christ who want to reveal Him to the world.

FINAL THOUGHT

To many of us, it is not news that we are to love as Christ loved, and forgive "even as God in Christ forgave" (Eph. 4:32). However, instead of mustering all our willpower to try and forgive, only to fail, we must recognise that forgiveness is supernatural. We cannot, but He can. It is through that otherworldly grace we encounter that we can forgive the inexcusable in others and endeavour to reconcile. Have you experienced God's forgiveness of the inexcusable in you?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION (These questions are best discussed in groups of 2-3 for greater safety and vulnerability) :

1. When was the last time you felt offended with someone in your life or church community? How did you respond? (E.g. bypass, disengage, etc)
2. Have you seen the subtle influence of our cultural moment, described in the line '*cutting toxic people off for our wellness*', in your own life and relationships?
3. What is a relationship(s) in your life that you feel needs reconciliation? What is the greatest obstacle to that reconciliation?
4. Consider the two postures for reconciliation mentioned. What do you feel the Lord leading you to commit to?

CORD GROUP PRACTICE

We strongly recommend allowing your CORD group to journey with you through these complex relational situations which can be overwhelming. Discernment, the D in CORD, is one of the key areas we speak lovingly into each other's lives and keep on track (See [Primer](#) for pointers). Gather counsel on how you can approach your circumstance of relational brokenness. Members

of your CORD group can also help to prepare you for any form of confrontation through group reflection and role-playing conversations — see [Fighting With Integrity](#) — a guide from Bridgetown Church.

CARE & RESOURCE

We recognise that this topic of discussion may bring up painful emotions or issues to the surface. Here are some resources available:

1. Care & Counseling

If you are hurting and need someone to talk to, you can reach out to our leaders and/or prayer team. If you prefer to write in, you can submit your prayer request using our [online form](#) and a staff or ministry team member will contact you to schedule a video call, or in-person session if possible. For professional counseling services, we can recommend some contacts at your request.

2. LifeGroup & CORD Group

These two groups are part of our pathway for intentional discipleship, through relationships and spiritual friendship. If you are not yet part of a LifeGroup or CORD Group, please email hello@thecity.sg or speak to one of our leaders to indicate your interest.

3. Books

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality, Pete and Geri Scazzero

Wounded in the Church: Hope Beyond the Pain, Ray Beeson and Chris Hayward