

“PRAYER: Reconciliation”

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Matthew 5:21-26

Asbury United Methodist Church

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- During this season of Lent, we as a church are going through a sermon series on PRAYER.
 - Our hope is, that we as a congregation would grow in our prayer lives. That we would each have vibrant, fruitful prayer lives. So, just to kick us off this morning and get us thinking, let me ask a reflection question:
-How would you describe your prayer life today? What words would you use?
 - Maybe, your prayer life is really strong right now. You’re spending time each day in prayer, and praying continually throughout the day.
 - Maybe you’re like John Wesley, and have your own prayer closet that you spend significant amounts of time in each day.
 - Or maybe you’re like Cheryl Steffen, our Prayer Coordinator here at Asbury, who is such a leader in our prayer ministries.
 - If that’s you and your prayer life is going well, great!
 - On the other hand, maybe your prayer life is really struggling right now. It’s not where you hoped it would be.
 - Maybe, you find yourself relating to the little boy who mixed up his prayers and his rhymes whenever he prayed at night, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, and if he hoolers let him go, eaney meanie miney mo.”

-I'm glad you thought that was funny. If you wouldn't have laughed, it was Pastor Daniel's idea to use in the sermon.

- But, regardless of where your prayer life is at today, I am hoping and praying that the Lord would use this sermon series on prayer to help us grow in our prayer lives.

- In the first week of this sermon series, we talked about the importance of "praise" in our prayers. In fact, that's where our prayers begin: with praise to God!

- We can look at the Lord's Prayer, the prayer Jesus taught us to pray and that we pray together each Sunday as a church. That prayer begins with praise: "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed by thy name!"

- Even when we find ourselves in life's most difficult moments, we know that they don't have the final say. Praise is still possible in those dark and difficult moments.

- And then, last week, we talked about the concept of "pardon" in our prayers. Our God is a God who forgives!

- We read from Isaiah 55, where it says, "God will abundantly pardon." So we have been forgiven and set free and pardoned.

- We celebrate that truth every week when we come to the Lord's table for communion, and proclaim these words of truth: "In the Name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven."

- Since we are forgiven, since we are set free and pardoned, we can come to the Lord! We can enter his presence with gladness and singing.

- So, that's where we've been the last two weeks. Looking at praise and pardon in our prayers.

-Today, we are looking at the importance of reconciliation in our prayers. We can define reconciliation as “changing from one form to another – especially from enmity to friendship.”

-This is what Pastor Tom wrote for us in our sermon journals this week: “Like the cross, reconciliation is both vertical and horizontal. God pardons us, but we must extend forgiveness to others.”

- I love that imagery of reconciliation being like the cross. It is both vertical and horizontal.

- It is vertical in the sense that we are pardoned and forgiven before God. We are reconciled to God Himself!

- That is the language Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 5:

- “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

- So we can see how reconciliation is vertical. It is between us and God.

- Yet, that’s not all! Reconciliation is also horizontal. It is horizontal in the sense that we need reconciliation with others.

- God doesn’t want us walking around with bitterness and anger in our hearts. God desires for us to be reconciled and united with our whole family of faith!

- And what’s important to understand is this: A lack of reconciliation has dire consequences.

- It would be an entire sermon series in itself, if we were just to list all of the negative consequences that come from a lack of reconciliation.
- We could discuss damaged relationships or broken families or a lower quality of life or constantly feeling frustrated and so on.
- However, what may be the most serious consequence of a lack of reconciliation, is a damaged prayer life. A lack of reconciliation has the potential to greatly hinder our prayer lives.
 - Jesus certainly understood this to be true. He addresses this concept in his Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew, chapters 5,6, and 7.
- So, out of the reverence we have in our hearts for the Word of God, let's stand together and read these words out loud.

-(Matthew 5:21-26)
- These are very strong words from Jesus. He views this work, this ministry of being reconciled, as extremely important. He understands how a lack of reconciliation can mean shipwreck for our prayer lives.
- There's so much we can take away from this passage, but I just want to share a couple of thoughts. From this passage, we can see...

① Relationships are invaluable in the Kingdom of God.

- So, just take a moment and look around this room. Or, if you're watching online, think about the hundreds of people watching online with you right now.
- The relationships that are present, the relationships that exist because of Christ, are among the most valuable things in all of the universe.

- As Christians, we value relationships above just about anything else. That is vastly different from what the world values.
- Think of what the world values. Power. Money. Gain. Coming out on top. That is not true for the church. We value each other. We value relationships. When we say, “You are loved!” – we really mean it. You are loved. You are valued.

- And such great things arise out of the relationships we have with others in the Kingdom of God. I’ll give one example.
- About a month and a half ago, the Outreach Team was having our weekly meeting. One member brought up the idea of having Asbury be a covid vaccination site. We all thought that was a great idea, and began to pray.

- Well, on Sunday of that week, Kim Benson (an amazing member here at Asbury), emailed Pastor Tom.
- She shared that she was “coming out of retirement” to help Passport Health do vaccine clinics here in Tulsa, and she was wondering if Asbury could be a site.
- Well, things progressed from there, and since last month, we’ve seen over 3,300 people come through and get vaccinated.
- Additionally, each person that gets their vaccine comes into this sanctuary and waits for 15 minutes before leaving. We’ve been intentional about making this a place of peace, and a place where people can be prayed for if they desire.

- But all of that to say, this great ministry, arose from a relationship. The relationship Kim has with people here at Asbury. And this great ministry was able to be pulled off

because of the relationships present among the many volunteers as well. So, let's take a moment and applaud Kim and all of our many vaccine volunteers.

-Friends, God can bring such great things out of our relationships with one another. Relationships are invaluable in the Kingdom of God. We should do all that we can to protect them, and seek reconciliation when necessary.

② Reconciliation is a crucial concept in the Kingdom of God.

-This isn't something of minor importance. This isn't something that we can downplay or say, "It really doesn't matter."

-Instead, this is something that takes high priority in our relationships with others.

- The example Jesus gives us is brilliant. He says, "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

-Now, I don't know about you, but it's been a while since I went down to the Temple and made a sacrifice. Slash, I've never done that... probably because the Temple was destroyed about 1,900 years before I was born.

-But, in Jesus day, this was huge! The moment that you bring your gift to the altar is literally one of the most holy and sacred moments in the life of rituals.

-In writing about this text, Dallas Willard says, "The practice was that nothing should interrupt this ritual except some more important ceremonial matter that required immediate attention."

-Knowing that, knowing the great importance of this moment, Jesus still says, “Reconciliation. Relationships come before this.”

- But, again, we may not fully resonate with this illustration of altars and sacrifices because it is pretty foreign to us.

-But how about a wedding? Let’s say you’re the groom, and you’re standing at the front of the church. Waiting for the bride to walk down. The music starts playing. And, in that moment, you think, “Oh man, I need to apologize to my soon-to-be mother-in-law first.”

-That’s the kind of weight Jesus is giving to relationships. He is illustrating the value of them in this passage.

③ We are called to work toward reconciliation in the Kingdom of God.

-In other words, we have to put effort into this! Reconciliation requires work. We cannot avoid it or neglect it. We each have strategic parts to play.

- And, what sometimes may not be the easiest thing to hear, is that we are often the ones who made the mistake and need to ask for forgiveness.

-That’s a lot harder to talk about than, “He’s in the wrong.” Or, “She’s in the wrong. They need to make things right with me.”

- Bret Hansen, in his book *Unoffendable*, writes about that. He uses the illustration of driving in traffic.

-Now, just to be fair, no one likes driving in traffic. It’s stressful. It makes you late. People are honking... It’s not a good time.

-But, what Bret Hansen points out, and what we've probably thought before, is that everyone else in this traffic jam is doing the wrong thing... except me.

-I (and I alone!) am the only one, out of the hundreds of cars around me, doing the right thing! If everyone would be like me, we would be out of this mess!

-But, as we can probably imagine, that's not the healthiest way of thinking – both in traffic and in life.

-It's important to take honest looks at ourselves and see if we, in any way, have hurt others. And if so, we should seek reconciliation.

- Now, with that being said, it is important to note that we aren't responsible for the outcomes.

-We can seek reconciliation with others, but they may not be receptive of it. They may want division and disharmony to continue.

-But the thing is, we are not responsible for their decisions. We are responsible for our actions. Here's another quote from Dallas Willard:

“We do not control outcomes and are not responsible for them, but only for our contribution to them. Does our hearts long for reconciliation? Have we done what we can? Honestly? Do we refuse to substitute ritual behaviors for genuine acts of love? Do we mourn for the harm that our brother's anger is doing to his own soul, to us and to others around us?”

-If the answer is “yes” to those questions, we are doing our part. Again, our brother or sister may not be receptive to the reconciliation, but we have done what we can do.

- So, as we can see here in Matthew 5, in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus places such a strong emphasis on right relationships with others. On reconciliation. On not allowing divisions and disharmony to hurt our prayer lives.
 - And this is certainly something that the earliest followers of Jesus picked up on and emphasized.
 - We see Paul write about it continually in his letters. I particularly love what he says in Colossians 3:
 - “Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”
 - We see the entirety of the New Testament pointing to the importance of reconciliation.
- This continues on, to after the New Testament period. In fact, our main passage today (Matthew 5:21-26) was a passage that the early church in the first centuries diligently studied and lived out.
 - The early church father Cyprian called that text “Jesus’ law of prayer.” He viewed right relationships as something that was necessary for authentic worship.
 - Another early church father, Tertullian, taught that “reconciliation is a precondition for prayer.”
 - These teachers, these early Christians, they looked at this text and they took it seriously! They lived it out in community.

- Here's just one example. It was a regular practice for deacons in the church to call out during a worship service, "Is there anyone who maintains anger with his neighbor?"
- And, if there was a person who was angry with a neighbor, they would be persuaded to make peace with them.
- So, just for fun this morning, I thought we would try something similar. "Does anyone here have something they're angry about with their neighbor?"
- I'm just kidding! But, I share that, to say that this was important to the early church.
- They truly believed that their prayers, their worship, would be hindered if they held on to bitterness and anger.
- So, they regularly did actions like this in order to promote that reconciliation.
- They also kissed each other with a holy kiss in order to promote reconciliation, but we won't be doing that today, either. I don't think it's very covid-friendly.
- So, reconciliation was important to Jesus. Reconciliation was important to the early church. And reconciliation should be important to us today.
 - As Christians living today, we should work toward reconciliation. And again, it's not easy work. It requires effort.
 - Sometimes, though, our approach is to simply ignore the hard things that need to get done. We say to ourselves, "Eh, that'll take care of itself." But it never does!
- Holding on to anger and bitterness and unforgiveness is almost like a wildfire. If we simply ignore it, and do nothing about it, it's only going to grow and get stronger.

-I really appreciated what a respected pastor friend of mine had to say about this passage and concept: “Avoidance does not equal reconciliation.” (Repeat)

-If there’s conflict or anger between others, simply ignoring them or the problem doesn’t equal reconciliation. In fact, it’s probably going to just make things worse.

-So let’s be proactive. Let’s work at reconciliation and forgiveness, even when it’s not easy.

- When I first came here to Asbury last summer, I heard a story that really moved me.

- This past week as I was thinking about prayer and reconciliation, I was reminded of this story.

- Ryan and Lora were a married couple, and they moved to the Republic of Georgia as missionaries. Our church actually helped support them, so some of you may remember them.

- Their heart was to serve the Muslim people there and share the love of Jesus Christ. They also had a young son named Caleb.

- They were very fruitful in their ministry in Georgia and saw God do great works there.

- In July of 2018, the three of them were going hiking to a very beautiful waterfall that was a popular place for backpacking in the country.

- On their way to the waterfall, they met a 19-year-old shepherd and shared their lunch with him. This shepherd, ka-bar-ee, would later come back and murder the three of them.

- It was a horrendous, horrendous tragedy. Ka-bar-ee was convicted and sentenced for the triple-murder.

- But that's not how the story ends. It took Ryan's mom, Lin, two days after hearing of the tragedy, to forgive ka-bar-ee.
 - She truly forgave him, in her heart. And she continually forgives him to this day.
 - But she didn't just forgive him. She also did this. Let's watch this **interview clip with her...** (around 1:30 minutes)

- I was so moved when I watched that video. That was one of the most powerful stories of forgiveness and reconciliation that I had ever seen.
 - And so, this week, I had the privilege of talking with Lin on the phone. I knew that she is a busy person, so I was hoping to maybe get 15 minutes with her. We talked for over 1-and-a-half hours!
 - I was so encouraged by her faith. She was sharing with me about her decades of ministry in Africa and her heart for one-on-one discipleship and all that she's doing to share the Gospel.

- And what I was so interested in hearing about, was her prayer life in relation to this tragedy. And do you know what word she kept using to describe her prayer life: "intimacy."
 - In fact, she said "intimacy with God" is the whole focus of her ministry! She hopes to help people have a closer walk with the Lord.

- And she shared that, had she held on to bitterness and anger and unforgiveness, that intimacy with God in prayer would have been so fractured. Her prayer life would have taken a hit.
 - She didn't want to lose the intimacy and fellowship she had with God in her prayer life, when she needed it the most.

-Like Jesus, Lin knew that not forgiving others, not allowing reconciliation to take place, damages prayer lives.

- And so, Asbury Tulsa, may we too strive for reconciliation with others. This world is so divided and damaged as it is. May we be a voice of change. May we offer something different.

- I encourage us to ask ourselves, “How can I promote reconciliation in my relationships this week?”

- Or, another question can be, “When I think of reconciliation, does someone come in mind?”

- If we allow our relationships to go unchecked, if we don’t strive for reconciliation, our prayer lives will be seriously damaged.

The intimacy we experience in prayer will be hindered.

- My final encouragement to us is this: Don’t try to do this on your own. Don’t try to seek reconciliation using your own power.

- Instead, ask the Lord for strength. For wisdom. For guidance, in seeking reconciliation with others.

- We have the opportunity to do that as we come to the Lord’s table for communion. There’s a line that we will pray together in the liturgy, and I invite us to truly mean it, when we say it:

“Make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.”

- In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.