

“Truth and Reconciliation”
Matthew 5:21-26
The First Sunday after Pentecost
May 26, 2024
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Matthew 5:21-26 (Gafney)

Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘*You shall not murder,*’ and ‘whoever murders shall be subject to judgment.’ But I say to you all that if you are angry with a sister or brother, you will be liable to judgment, and if you call a sister or brother an idiot, you will be subject to the council; and if you say, ‘you fool,’ you will be subject to the hell of fire. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and you remember that your sister or brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your sister or brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to favorable terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way with them or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the court officer, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

When Hector Aristizabal was 20 years old, he was taken forcefully from his home in Medellin, Colombia and accused of conspiring with the Revolutionary Armed Forces in Colombia, also known as FARC, a Marxist-based guerilla group opposing the Colombian government’s oppressive and militarized regime. His brother had disappeared a few days earlier, and Hector knew that the rest of the family would be targeted, though the accusations were baseless. Hector was kidnapped and tortured by the Colombian army for 3 days straight, until they were satisfied that this psychology student and actor did not have anything to do with the revolutionaries.

The trauma of those three days follows Hector almost 40 years later. When I was in college in Oberlin, Ohio, I met Hector when he performed his one-man show, *Nightwind*, and offered workshops on the Theater of the Oppressed. This type of theater practice was honed by Augusto Boal, based on the Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire, drawing on the knowledge and experiences of the participants in order to work through challenging experiences, dream up new realities, and explore peacemaking across diverse identities. As for Hector, he combined his acting background and psychology and counseling expertise to explore the traumatic experiences not only he himself faced, but the Colombian people faced, during the multi-decade civil war.

After exile in the United States for thirty years, Hector moved back to Medellin in 2017 following the Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC, and he now works with people all over Colombia, from all sides of the war, assisting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in processing their trauma and moving forward together--using the power of acting.

Theater, as with many kinds of art, offers opportunities for truth-telling that are vital to the process of reconciliation.

We see this in our scripture today, which is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. You know the one: he's on a mountaintop surrounded by crowds, and he shares the beatitudes: he blesses the poor in spirit, the grieving, the merciful, the peacemakers. He goes on to teach all who are present about the importance of following the Law, the Torah that has been given to the Jewish people—and then he expands upon the Law, explaining more about how the rules and guidelines contained therein apply to the community in that place and time.

And with our specific scripture, Jesus draws on words in the Ten Commandments, “you shall not murder.” And then he expands the consequences to include *even* behaviors of division, *even* rude speech and *even* thoughts of derision against a sibling. Not only are the actions important, but the behaviors and speech and thoughts that lead to the action.

But Jesus does not buy into retributive justice—he's more of a restorative justice kind of guy, and so this part of the Sermon on the Mount shares guidelines for accountability and forgiveness as well. Jesus says that before worshipping with the community, if you know that someone is holding something against you, you must go to them and reconcile. If you have been accused of something, if you have sinned against someone, if you have caused harm, Jesus says, “it is your responsibility to go to the person you have harmed and make peace.”

Woah. That is heavy. And in a world and time where there is so much division, politically and socially and in our families and workplaces and places of worship—we need the reminder to reconcile.

And it is SO MUCH easier said than done. I'm sure we all know that and have experienced that on multiple occasions.

Irish poet Pádraig Ó Tuama wrote, “reconciliation is an ongoing process, rather than something that's reached once and then you stay there forever. Reconciliation doesn't work as a final event—reconciliation is a continual truth telling, and there's tension in that, rather than easy resolve.”

What I find really intriguing about Jesus' exhortation to peace is that it is the responsibility of the perpetrator, the one who has done the harm, to be self-reflective, assess their actions, and approach the one whom they have harmed. Not only must one be able to hear the truth told by the wronged party, one must be able to tell the truth to oneself.

All this before offering a gift at the altar, all this before worshipping in communion with others and with the Holy. Worship is at its purest form an encounter of humanity with God, and so whatever gets in the way of that encounter must be set aside before approaching relationship with the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

Truth and reconciliation are perhaps the hardest parts of being human and living in community. And time and again, humanity shows that we must help each other do the difficult and necessary work of truth and reconciliation, going so far as to create Committees and Commissions whose express purposes are to carry out processes of restorative justice so that harm can be addressed.

After South African apartheid was ended and a democratic government founded in 1994, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to help the country's citizens process the trauma of human rights violations by telling their truths and accessing reparations. It also provided an opportunity for perpetrators to acknowledge their involvement, express remorse, and access rehabilitation.

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation addressed the tragic history of residential schools that routinely kidnapped First Nations, Inuit and Metis children from their homes and forced assimilation to western-European ways of being. This was part of a genocide of First Nations peoples, as culture and language was systematically eradicated through these schools, often under the auspices of church bodies. Excavation of the truth even included unearthing mass graves of children who were taken from their communities. The mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was to inform all Canadians about what happened in residential schools, inspiring changes to education systems, governance and beyond.

Germany, Rwanda, Finland, Ireland, Ukraine and many more countries around the world have established Truth and Reconciliation Commissions to confront their histories in order to move their nation forward. As William Faulkner wrote, "the past isn't dead. It isn't even past." Thus the need to acknowledge and move through. Though the outcomes of the work of these Commissions varies by place and time and topic, those words are always found together: truth and reconciliation.

I wonder what the United States needs to tell the truth about. I wonder what a Truth and Reconciliation Commission could help unearth, could help us look at with honesty, could help us make right with reparations and rehabilitation, could help us begin to heal...

And before the more cynical among us think, "Yeah, right, these kinds of commissions are just for show and gaining political points," know that I have seen truth and reconciliation in action.

In July 2019, I traveled to Cali, Colombia with Janet Hasselblad, Doug Beasley, and our Evergreen Executive Minister Rev. Doug Avilesbernal and over 200 Baptist peacemakers from around the world to attend the Global Baptist Peace Conference. It was a profound experience.

On the first full day of the conference, we all sat crowded in a tight, hot white tent on a field at the Baptist Seminary in the Valle de Cauca region. On the stage were several people in conversation with one another. One woman was Fabiola Perdomo, a journalist. Her husband Juan Carlos Narvaez had been a local politician who was kidnapped by guerillas in a raid on a parliamentary building in 2002. He later died in captivity. Since then, Perdomo has been active in advocacy for truth-telling about the war, from victims to families to survivors to perpetrators. On the stage next to her sat Victoria Sandino, now a representative of the FARC government, who had arrived at the event with two armed guards.

Perdomo told her story openly, at times with a shaky voice. And the woman next to her was clearly affected. "Sandino apologized profoundly for what the guerillas did to Perdomo's husband and asked for forgiveness. For her part, Perdomo described the agonizingly long process of working through her grief and rage to reach a place of healing. Then she turned to Sandino. "I

do forgive you,” she said. “I can forgive now.” And, she added, she believes she can also forgive her husband’s killers.”¹

Forgiveness is one step in the process of reconciliation. And forgiveness is a tender process, one that cannot be demanded or forced. True forgiveness can only come after telling the truth—both the party that was harmed must tell the truth, and the party that did the harming must tell the truth—to themselves and publicly.

Only when the truth has been revealed, set out in the open and examined and acknowledged, can the process of reconciliation begin. Truth-telling is theater, of sorts—drawing the attention of a group to something that is rarely spoken aloud, eliciting base emotions, confronting the group with an experience that asks for compassion and resonance, and guiding the group to move through the experience together.

Truth-telling is hard. And messy. And we are imperfect humans, and so we will not think or speak or act perfectly. But I think of Fabiola Perdomo, who when asked about the flaws in the 2016 Peace Accord and its implementation plan, Perdomo said, “I would rather have an imperfect peace process than a perfect war.” There is no mere arriving at peace, she told us. Peace is not a destination but a process.²

A process that begins, as Jesus taught, with self-reflection, truth-telling, willingness to engage in honest conversation, and reconciliation through steps to make the harm right.

Back to my friend Hector.

In his book *Blessing Next to the Wound*, Hector writes of a transformative moment in the theater:

“When I perform *Nightwind*, which includes my own arrest and torture, I try to involve the audience. Early on in the performance, I kick a balloon representing a soccer ball into the seats and encourage people to hit it back, and so I am very aware of the people seated before me. One night, there was a man in the front row who definitely looked Latin American. As the show started, I saw him exchange glances with the woman beside him. A while later, I realized he was crying.

¹ ² https://baptistnews.com/article/baptist-christians-are-working-for-peace-in-some-of-the-worlds-hardest-places/?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR2h1cwz4ZYC7BaTsdj1HPyFgp4gisKQR31AEy_Tov1LP3mN9RI6p_r oQo_aem_AbYNvEY3RknYFDfJrtXipWikZrBATvJ8IG-P8N6GThbU-z5ZeCoqpBIN_3ZTwtNjHNs7UAV-8sbuF5oLj0g4HPOC#.XUA3eZNKh3R

² ¹ chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://files.constantcontact.com/7b8b9a0d301/d23734d3-678e-40cd-b8a3-6fa121e4007d.pdf?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR3uvCNyUOJUUsX0YD2HyI5B6523wyZLITdaT4fzalx_cPM0Y5DcNzK3e oYA_aem_AbY5pK4M0GqIzU0QygSh5-F6DpxK5REWe-5tF3R2f3u2KI4RrLqtFIRR5PiLo7LS1Ee7_HqgX5vjOfFvi2oNWMF4

After the performance, this man stood and addressed the audience. ‘Everything you have just seen is true. I know that, even though I was on the other side.’ He told us he was in the Colombian military; his father had been a high-ranking officer. It was a family tradition. For generations they’d been committed to protecting the nation in the way they thought best. ‘Hector protested at the School of the Americas,’ he said, ‘I studied there.’ He swallowed hard. ‘What’s happening in Colombia is wrong,’ he said. ‘Hector and I can both agree it has to change.’ Then he asked if I would allow him to hug me. We embraced. This wouldn’t have happened at a protest march or rally. It happened in a theater.”³

There are many venues for reconciliation— theater, church, civic meetings, as well as marches and rallies. Each of these venues has their different purposes, and opens up opportunities for truth-telling in various ways.

But what they all have in common is that people can encounter one another as human beings in these places. Stripping away the layers of societal and familial and political expectations and teachings that so often divide us, humanity can recognize humanity. Laughing or crying at a play, opera, or ballet; grieving and rejoicing as one body in a church congregation; uniting around shared values to advocate for your neighborhood; chanting together as you move through the streets calling for a better world—humanity telling the truth, encountering each other honestly, and beginning a process of reconciliation...you can see it, hear it, taste it, feel it...

Beloved church, with each of us holding multiple and diverse identities, with each of us carrying our own experiences of harm done and harm received, with each of us being complex and imperfect human beings—with all these realities, we have our work cut out for us. Community is challenging because of all of these realities—and it is so worth it, because of all of these things, too.

Dear ones, you are worth it. Your dignity and integrity are worth truth-telling, you are worth the work of reconciliation after harm done. We are worth it, together.

When we face the truth with courage, we open ourselves to reconciliation, and we move all of us toward a future where God’s dream of peace is lived each day.

Benediction

The feet of the world today walk through paths of asphalt and violence,
but the heart of the humble is stronger than cannons and bombs.

Peace for humanity
will not come from outside,
nor will it be built with nuclear weapons,
nor will it arrive by agreement of governments.

It is present
in the heart of the universe

and all things
walk towards peace.
It will arrive like the dawn for this battered and almost tired world;
and it will come by the hand of the simple,
of the humble people,
of the poor of the earth,
and will be announced by the mouth
of children,
and to the sound of music
of brave youths.

— *Latin American Psalm for Peace, adapted from "Seeing reality, hearing hope," Consultation of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1993*