***“First Be Reconciled”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Feb. 16, 2019

**Sirach 15:15–19**

15 If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.

16 He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.

17 Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given.

18 For great is the wisdom of the Lord; he is mighty in power and sees everything;

19 his eyes are on those who fear him, and he knows every human action.

**Matthew 5:21–26**

21“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to judgment. 23So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Sirach stresses that wisdom must be freely chosen. That fits with Jesus, but he shifts the emphasis. He stresses two main points: first, that *motivation* is essential; secondly, reconciliation is more important than ritual. Both parts have to do with relationships.

Let’s look at motivation. Jesus says that it’s not just the *crime*, such as murder, that makes you liable to judgment, but the *anger* and *insults* are also blameworthy. They may seem like little things, but little things *matter*; they are the mortar in a relationship. What you harbor in your heart really matters. He is saying that, since anger is what leads to murder, you are blameworthy if you hold on to the anger, even if you don’t commit the murder. The resentment that you harbor in your heart is harmful. Psychology tells us that, too. Resentment harms *oneself*. Bottled up rage causes inner pain and unrest. You need to not only release the other person from resentment, but you need to release *yourself*. Be resolved not only to do no harm to others, but to do no harm to yourself.

Jesus places the story within a ritual setting because he knew this would resonate with people. We don’t offer sacrifices, but we do sometimes take ritual very seriously. He imagines someone bringing a gift to the altar, then remembering that his brother or sister has something against him. Jesus says drop what you are doing—“*leave* your gift there before the altar and *go*; *first* be reconciled to your brother or sister, and *then* come and offer your gift” (Matt 5:24). He is clearly saying that reconciliation takes precedence over ritual. Drop the ritual and go attend to the relationship, which is more important. You can always come back and finish the ritual later.

He knows that rituals matter a lot to some people, so he uses a hypothetical ritual setting. But it is clear that the ritual doesn’t really matter *in comparison* with the relationship. His next sentence ignores ritual and moves to a judicial setting: your brother is taking you to court. Jesus says “come to terms quickly with your accuser” before you get to court. This accuser is also your brother, so seek to be reconciled, quickly. Come to terms. Brotherhood takes priority over rights and powers. Another way to say this is that the power of brotherhood takes precedence over the power of legal rights.

Further, relationships need attention, like plants require watering. We see this in families sometimes, where people learn to dissolve conflicts and not let them rupture the family. A family or a society is not just a bunch of building blocks. More important is the *linkage*, thebond, between the members. Relationships are the mortar. If trust and kindness are not present, we are only mechanically walking through life, attending to material needs. A *lasting* society or family needs better mortar than that.

In the course of living, unfortunately, disputes about rights and justice *will* present themselves. You need to make a conscious and vigorous effort to put brotherhood ahead of everything. Make that choice, and back it up with action. Here, Jesus’ teaching unites with the Sirach passage. You have a choice between life and death, between water and fire, Sirach says (15:16–17). He adds “great is the wisdom of the Lord” (15:18). Jesus shows us how wisdom is meant to help us avoid unnecessary conflict. God is not just into judicial right, but wants to protect love and brotherhood. This is where Jesus regularly goes beyond what the Old Testament can offer. He shows how our ethics are ultimately based on *love*. Now, fairness must also be present. Fairness is *always* necessary. Confucianism, Judaism, and Islam all say that. But Jesus says you need to preserve love and friendship, not only justice. If justice were the issue, Jesus might say “prepare and make sure that your case is *just* before you go to court, and that you are not being unfair.” But he doesn’t even look at that issue, *only* at the issue of relationship. First, take some action to *save your relationship*.

So how does that apply to us? If we have a dispute with someone in our church, we should seek first of all to understand the other person’s feelings. Empathy comes first. At least imagine yourself walking a mile in the other’s shoes. Sensitive conversation is the best reconciling approach. Say a little something, but be *very* attuned to what the other person says. Say a little; listen a lot. In a way, what the other person says is more important. As Paul says “think with sober judgment . . . . outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom 12:3, 10). That’s how we make this a brotherhood and sisterhood, a place where not only fairness, but *love*, prevails. When I spell it out like this, it seems obvious, doesn’t it? That’s because Jesus and Paul have made this truth so primary, and so urgent. It is my job to not muddy-up what they have made clear.

There’s nothing more for me to say. “First be reconciled to your brother or sister.” This is one of the most important, and sometimes most neglected, of Jesus’ teachings. What is of primary importance (love) often gets mixed up with matters of secondary importance (power, authority, rights). Instead, “first be reconciled.” Then we have a remarkable community. When we listen to and care for each other, then we *show* people, by our *love*, that we are his disciples.