

The Gravity of Relationships

[Matthew 5:21-26](#); [Matthew 18:15-20](#)

Becoming a Healing and Reconciling Church

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, January 27, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

God has created gravitational power as a law of the universe. When God created us, God set about the task of drawing us to himself as the center and creator of that universe. God placed in us a kind of yearning which hungers to reciprocate his loving attraction. We love God because God first loved us. We love one another because God loves us.

However, as we know, there are forces that battle within us and between us. While there is a kind of centripetal force that draws us toward God and one another, there is also a kind of centrifugal force that drives us away from God and one another. Love attracts and sin attacks. Jesus assumed both forces to be at work in our lives when he taught ethics in the gospels. In the Gospel of Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, we have heard Jesus' command:

23When you are offering a gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift at the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother and sister.

Is Jesus really saying, 'If you are here in worship today, and you know that someone is upset with you, leave worship immediately and go and be reconciled with them?' How many of us should just leave right now? While there is a radical urgency in Jesus' ethical teaching, I rather think Jesus may be saying to us, 'If you are working on your relationship with God here in worship, but have other relationships that are unresolved, go work on the others, and come back to worship God.' Jesus is saying: your relationship with others reflects and impacts your true relationship with God. If you come to worship while you have hurt other people, go back and reconcile with those before you come back to worship. True worship, you see, is a practice of the gravity of the relationship with God. It is also an affirmation of the gravity of relationships between human beings.

Jesus also commands us in Matthew 18:15:

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

If someone here in the church has caused you hurt, go and talk with them alone. Ask them to listen to you and see if they will rebuild their relationship with you. When something is not right in human relationships, Jesus is very clear in his teaching: we, as disciples, have an imperative to make it right. When we hurt one another, we must heal the wound that inflicts the pain. If there is a festering communal infection, we must cut it open and let God's gracious breath heal the relationship and the whole community. It is not good, from God's perspective, and in light of God's eternal purposes, to allow human relationships to remain broken. We must work as quickly as possible to confront, confess, forgive and reconcile disintegrating relationships. If we do not, we are betraying God's intention toward us, and for us, in Jesus Christ. We are, in fact, negating the work of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray. Sovereign God, we acknowledge that you live in loving community and unity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We see, in Christ, your passion to reconcile the world to yourself. We are grateful for the gracious way you come to us in the life, teaching, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We are grateful you will not let us go. Help us now hear your word of grace, and your act of embrace. Lead us to respond to your love, and move us to refuse to let go of one another in the church and in the world. Amen.

In 1968, at the height of racial unrest on college campuses, I was in college and I was playing intramural basketball. Our team had just run onto the court with the other team and we were shaking hands with one another. Our team was a very white group of young men and our opponents were the members of the Black Caucus on campus. On our team, we had a habit of saying to one another things like, "Boy, I hope you break a leg out there," or "Let's go, boys!" Now it's one thing to say that to a group of white teammates, but it was a completely different thing to greet a black player on the other team as I did that night, with these words: "Hey, Boy, I hope you have a good game!"

As soon as I said it, I knew I had made a significant mistake. The look on his face said it all— a combination of disbelief, disdain and anger was quickly moving from a body posture of ease to a body posture of confrontation and antagonism. I felt his hand pull away; and thought I felt a hint of a clinching, as his body language moved from 'basketball' to 'battle.' Immediately, in my own gut, I knew my next words would drive us either to blows... or slow us to a kind of détente. And then he came back with, "Do we have a problem here, Boy? Let's settle it right now!"

In the visceral sense of the moment, I knew I had careened down a dark alley of making an enemy; and I needed to back up and correct my errant direction. In those flashing seconds, I realized how deeply-embedded cultural bigotry and racial disdain had formed my own vocabulary. I knew I needed to repent, repair, and reconcile with someone whom I had just injured. And I needed to do it immediately — for my health... for his hurt... for our team's welfare... and frankly, for the truth of the Gospel of Jesus; because things could get much worse, if we didn't repair. Righteousness and justice demanded a recanting and a restoring.

All of this was going on in my mind in split seconds; I can still remember the thoughts and the feelings. Feeling the imminent danger of no action... or wrong action... I was tempted to say: "Boy, did I get that wrong!" And I caught myself again. But instead, with a palpable sense of God's correction, I said: "I apologize. That was inappropriate. I said the wrong thing. Can we please start over? I want to play ball and not have a fight." The entropy of the moment went into a pause: the centrifugal force of distrust suspended there in the air—for just a few nanno-seconds— and the centripetal force of reconnection began to re-collect the flying apart that had

begun.

God has created us in such a way that there are dimensions of gravity in every relationship. One of those dimensions is that we are created in such a way as to be drawn toward God. God is continually coming after us, in Jesus Christ. Jesus came to win us back and rebuild our broken relationship with God. With God as our intense center of being, every human sense views God's centripetal force of grace pulling us toward him. The gravitational attraction of Jesus is greater than our resistance.

Another dimension is that we are created to be drawn toward one another. As we are being pulled into this relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God is also drawing us to be in right relationships with one another.

A third dimension is that every relationship counts. Every relationship has its own gravitas of eternal importance that is absolutely irreplaceable. It should be nurtured with delicacy and diligence.

Our relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, carries the greatest density and substance of any. Then, it is our relationships with one another that are given an eternal significance and seriousness because God loves us and calls us to love each other. When we are drawn close into God by the gravitational pull of the Holy Spirit, we, at the same time, are drawn into a circle of the communion of the Holy Spirit with one another. The closer we come to Jesus, the more Jesus calls us into intimacy, in appropriate ways, with one another. As we grow in love of God with our heart, mind, and strength, we will grow in loving one another, as we learn to love ourselves in appropriate ways — as God loves us. The gracious, gravitational pull of God becomes the source of our gravitational attraction to one another. We are more together than we are separate. We are more in interdependence than we are in independence or dependence. We are more as a team than we are as individual stars. We are more in ensemble than we are as soloists. We are more in cast than we are as celebrity. We are more in community than we are as individuals. We are more in synergy than we are isolation. We are stronger in family than we are in being alone. God said, in creation, "It is not good to be alone." And so God made us to be partners and neighbors; God created us for community. There is an attraction that we have toward one another.

But, as we see from the very beginning, even in Genesis, chapter 4, when God rejected Cain's offering, he said to Cain: "Why are you so angry? If you're not careful, sin will control you." And it did; Cain killed his brother Abel. The centrifugal resistance of Cain rejected the centripetal call of God to reconcile. Unresolved anger kills community.

God made us to be one another's keepers — to keep our relationships nurtured, healthy, and repaired. God made us to be together. We are created with a gravitational pull — with a hunger for togetherness and intimacy. But Jesus knew that those forces that can separate us, will resist the forces that bring us together. When Jesus is teaching his disciples the importance of following him and living out his commandments— his ethics— the first practical teaching he gives in the Sermon on the Mount is: what to do with damaged relationships. This is a strange place to go when Jesus is beginning his teaching. He connects his teaching to being in worship. Those of us here in worship today are commanded by him to take time, right now, and remember those (especially in this church or another church) who might have a problem with us. Jesus essentially says: leave your money at the offering plate and immediately go from here and rebuild those broken relationships.

In his teachings, it is clear that Jesus does not expect our relationships to be perfect. On the other hand, he expects that we will actually mess up — and quite often. Jesus knows that we will hurt one another. But Jesus meets us in the middle of worship, in the middle of our fragmented lives. Jesus meets us in our sinfulness —and NOT our righteousness. Jesus meets us in the middle of: being separated from our spouses... of thinking about divorce... of our misguided words with our children... of our anger toward our parents. Jesus meets us, even as we sit here in worship and think about those with whom we have anger and dissonance. Jesus does not speak to us after we get our act together. He speaks to us while we are drifting apart; as we are nursing our wounds; as we are spinning our complaints; as we are magnifying our rage; as we are simmering in our resentment; and as we are planning our revenge. As we are bandaging our wounds, and we are grieving our lost relationships, Jesus speaks to us while we're in trouble — in worship.

Right here, in worship, Jesus catches us short and confronts us with the ugly truth, saying: 'While you are trying to worship God, you know someone who is really upset with you. Go and resolve the conflict.' The Spirit of God may be whispering in your ear right now: 'What's the point of worshipping God when someone you used to call a friend is filing a lawsuit against you?' 'How can you sing this hymn, Stand Up and Bless the Lord, when you are sitting on your refusal to reconcile with a sister whom you hurt ten years ago; when you are avoiding a church member because you said the wrong thing to them awhile back; and when you live in the denial of how you talk about others behind their backs?' Jesus is saying to us: 'Don't just sit there and act pious. Do something about those terrible words and acts. Heal those relationships.'

Speed, interestingly enough, is of the essence here: rebuild broken relationships quickly. "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." This is urgent business. If you say a hurtful word, take it back immediately. If you do a harmful act, make amends for it as soon as possible. We must not be a congregation that stores up injury. We represent a God who is slow to anger, full of mercy, and inclined to forgive. We must be quick to face conflict; swift to ask forgiveness; and move to accelerate the work of reconciliation. Unresolved conflict is not just about our personal relationships; every lingering unforgiving relationship hurts the whole church. Every unresolved conflict inhibits our ministry to one another and our mission to the world. We, in fact, carry those unresolved resentments and guilt wherever we go. And they impact how we treat others, and how we protect ourselves.

So, hear this call of Jesus, here at the altar of God's presence in worship, under the cross. Some of us here, today, came to know Jesus even at an 'altar call.' I know I did. We were called out to accept Jesus' invitation: to hear him... come forward... and make a commitment to follow him and declare him as our Lord and Savior. Here, now, Jesus is saying to us: 'It is good that you offered your life to me at the altar of commitment. But have you made amends to the people that you have hurt over the years, since then? Have you asked forgiveness, or been reconciled with those whom you have belittled... or demeaned... or undermined... or devalued... or attacked... or abused?' Re-examine the gravity of your commitment to Christ and weigh your relationship ethics in the balance of the full measure of Jesus' teaching, who says: "If you know someone has something against you, go..." "If someone has sinned against

you, go..." As Jesus says, you are binding heaven from acting on earth, by not going. Jesus wants you to turn heaven loose on earth by engaging those who hurt you, and by going to those whom you have hurt.

If you cannot bring yourself to go on your own, then get together with someone...or friends...or counselors...who can help you go. Tell them your dilemma; have them pray for you. Give them permission to hold you accountable so that you do the right thing. Ask them to support you as you go, or have them go with you for support. Because, as Jesus has said, he is with you there, in the group gathered with God's purpose in mind. But whatever you do—whatever we do— let us not just keep coming back to worship Sunday-after-Sunday and going through the motions. Allow yourself to absorb the full gravity of Jesus' words. Ask for the centrifugal power of the Spirit to propel you out to make the necessary repairs; to do the restoration and complete the reconciliation. Give-in to the gravitational pull of being drawn to resolve with your adversary, as if you are being pulled into the very heart of God. As you have committed your life to Jesus Christ, make a new commitment to engage or embrace the person with whom you have long-term pain.

Many years ago, I knew two women who had the same last name. They were members of the same church. They were both single women; but, as far as I knew, they had never met each other. Then, one day, one of them took me aside and told me her story:

"Do you know Sarah?" she said. "Sarah was my twin sister. We grew up together and had a great relationship. But over the years, my mother began to love her more than me. And when my mother died, she left Sarah her whole estate and left me nothing. I was first angry with my mom; but then, over the years, I became more and more resentful toward Sarah, because she, over the years, has shared absolutely nothing with me. I have to scrimp and save; and she's always had lots of money to do what she wanted. I quit talking to her several years ago. She dropped out of church because I treated her so badly. And now she is dying of cancer. I think God wants me to go and reconcile with her, but I can't bring myself to do it. It's been too long. I can't bring myself to forgive her for that terrible thing that she did. What should I do?"

We talked about these teaching of Jesus — to be reconciled to others who have harmed us. She stirred the teaching around in her spirit for a few days; and then she came back and said, "I can't go by myself. I might give up. Will you go with me?"

I gulped. But I said, "Yes." And so I went with the sister to talk with Sarah before she died. And the sister said this: "Sarah, I've missed you. I've been very angry with you. The money doesn't mean anything to me anymore. I want to be with you during your last days. I want to be your sister again." And Sarah said, "I missed you! And I'm very glad you came!" When Sarah died, she left her sister all of her mother's estate, which was still considerable.

Jesus is telling us today not to wait. As you are here in worship today, commit yourself to rebuild those wounded relationships. As you give your tithes and gifts to God, decide to give yourself in reconciliation to those that you have harmed, and who have hurt you.

And in the gravity of this moment, here at the altar of commitment, if you feel the centripetal pull of God on your heart, commit yourself to Jesus Christ. Don't allow that centrifugal force of self-preservation to drive you away from God. Allow God's love and gracious gravitational power to bring you close. Here at the altar of worship, decide to follow Jesus. And then, go and rebuild those broken relationships.

Let us pray. God of love... and Lord of grace... Spirit of peace... come over this congregation with the power of your forgiveness and reconciliation. Draw us into your orbit of community with the attraction of your Son's shining face. Help us then turn to our friends, adversaries, and enemies, to reaffirm the gravity of your love for us, and re-engage the mutual attraction of your forgiveness and healing between us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Spirit who moves between them in love, Amen.