

Sermon - Proper 18A

The Text: Matthew 18:15

A father tells this story about his holiday. "Last September school holidays, my family decided to take a "trip" to central Australia. It seemed like such a good idea at the time! I imagined us all singing songs together as we travelled the long outback roads visiting places we had only seen on postcards and in books. But everything didn't quite work out as we had planned!

Mid-morning out in the middle of nowhere, I looked down to see that a light on the dashboard had come on. Now over the years I've learned to perfect a certain technique in dealing with these lights...its called denial.

So my reaction to the light on the dashboard was to say to myself: "That can't be a serious problem. It must be a faulty light. Really, there's nothing to worry about. Just keep driving, the light will go out and everything will return to normal."

But of course, the light didn't go out and things didn't return to normal. The car simply stopped. And being mechanically dysfunctional, I had no idea what was wrong or how to fix it!

Over the next few days as the 4-wheel drive was getting fixed, there were times when I seriously thought about dumping it in Alice Springs and moving on...because it seemed a lot easier than fixing it."

Well...I have told you that story because today we are talking about a far more serious kind of breakdown—a breakdown of relationships. And it seems to me that many of us approach our relational breakdowns the same way we might approach mechanical breakdowns—we see the warning lights, but we ignore them and the relationship breaks down. And because we often just don't know what to do, or because we know that fixing the relationship might become difficult, time consuming and costly, many of us simply abandon that relationship like an old car. It's not hard to litter our lives with broken relationships we have never tried to fix.

For some of us, breakdown of a relationship is the source of constant unrelenting, unrelieved pain!

A treasured friendship that has been scarred or lost.

A marriage where the partners have wounded one another and every conversation has an undertone of anger, defensiveness, and hurt.

Your relationship with one of your children or a parent or a sibling is going through an extended patch of irritation and poor communication.

You have a friend, a member of the church, who has left because of some disagreement and you are grieving the loss of that friendship.

Where once you enjoyed the company of a person and shared many good times together there is now only tension, anger or silence. Where there was once a bond of love and intimacy, now you only feel hurt because of the deep chasm between you.

The question is: is there anything we can do about it? Is there anything we should do about it?

The first thing that needs to be said is that Jesus regarded fixing up broken relationships as top priority. We know that to be true because of what he did to fix up the broken relationship between God and us. He thought that this was so important that he suffered and gave his life so that we could be reconciled to God. Jesus clearly states in everything he says and does that reconciliation was foremost in his plans and so also ought to be foremost in our lives.

Jesus says: If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift. (Matt 5:23-24).

These days, people don't really think twice about walking out of a church service early. But in Jesus day, worshipping God was so important, and that no one would ever consider leaving a worship service early!

The act of offering a sacrifice was about as solemn an act as you could get. But here Jesus does the unthinkable: he issues free passes for people to get up in the middle of a worship service, climb over as many people as necessary and head for the exit. Why?

To fix a broken relationship; to re-establish love where friendship has broken down.

As important as making a sacrifice in the temple was, reconciliation is even more important. Jesus said that the most compelling evidence that would convince the world that Christianity was real and true was the way his followers loved one another (John 13:35).

In short, when there is a need for forgiveness between two people, especially people who are brothers and sisters in Christ, he says "Deal with it". We can hide from the need for reconciliation; we can sweep it under the rug...for a while. But it's still there.

You can hold a grudge, or keep resentment hidden inside you, and the other person may not even know about it. But it eats at you. You think about it, you go around trying to avoid that other person, or when you do happen to meet accidentally, you can't look them in the face, you are reminded of the hurt that person has caused you and you get upset all over again.

Jesus says that it's always our responsibility to make the first move when a relationship breaks down! We are to take the initiative in seeking reconciliation.

But what if it's not my fault? What if it's 90% the other person's fault? What if it's completely their fault? What do I do then?

Jesus says, *"If you remember your brother or sister has something against you, then you go at once, (you take the initiative), and make peace". "If your brother or sister sins against you, then **you** go to that person ...!"*

Whether we like it or not, when a relationship breaks down, regardless of who is at fault, Jesus puts the burden on us to initiate reconciliation. He does that because you and I have experienced the reconciliation that is ours through the death of Jesus. We know what it is like to be separated from God because of sin. We know what it is to feel the relief and joy of knowing that the gap between God and us has been closed because of what Christ has done for us.

At our baptism we were joined to Christ, made part of God's family, given a new life, a new way of looking at the hurt and the pain our sinfulness causes in the lives of other people. When there has been a falling out, no matter who is at fault, it is our responsibility to be so concerned about the other person, that we will seek every avenue of making amends.

Jesus gives us another tip for making amends with those who have sinned against us in today's gospel reading. It is this: attempt to set the matter straight *privately*. Jesus is encouraging us to resist the temptation to make the conflict public. Go and meet them face to face, just the two of you, in private. Don't bring it up at a dinner party. Don't discuss it with your home friendship group in order to get them to agree with you about how awful the person has been. Don't get a whole bunch of other people involved in gossiping about what happened. Go to that person in private and work it out there first.

Go and speak to him or her, just the two of you, not with the intention of "giving him a piece of my mind" or telling her "how messed up she really is and that it's time she got her act together", but with a reconciling spirit, ready to listen and to understand, ready to resolve whatever it is that is causing offence, even if you think that you are the victim in this circumstance.

Go with the attitude that you want to be friends again, regardless of who is at fault. As James says, *"Everyone must be quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to become angry"*.

But how often don't we get all this wrong? We simply want to vent our spleen face to face with the other person or to others. Here's an example.

A while back, a driver was looking for a parking place. He found one, but it was small and it took a little time to parallel park. Apparently, the driver of the car behind him was not happy at all having to wait while he wriggled into the parking space! And he felt the need to share his feelings with the other driver! As he drove past, he wound down his window and yelled, "What's your problem?" (with rude name-calling and gesturing to emphasise his anger before driving off!)

Now here's the point: This guy did a lot of things right according to what Jesus said. He took immediate action. He recognised there was a problem. He clearly said that he

was agitated. He didn't go around gossiping and attempting to get other motorists on side. He asked a good question. And he was impressively direct!

But clearly there was no desire on his part to fix the relationship! He only wanted to blast the other driver and move on!

Does that sound familiar? Too often all we are interested in is giving the offender a blast and moving on. We are simply letting our sinful human nature take control and we aren't interested in fixing the broken relationship. We are not interested in working things out.

It's here at worship that we are reminded of how far Jesus was willing to come to fix our broken relationship with God! Even though the breakdown between God and us is our fault, he doesn't wait for us to come to him. He took that costly first step towards us, leaving the glory of heaven and sacrificing his life on the cross so that we might be reconciled to God!

Even though we find it hard at times to be reconciled to those who have hurt us and find it easier to strike back and be nasty, Jesus only responds with his undeserved love and forgiveness toward us. Jesus never stops offering us forgiveness and friendship with God.

Jesus encourages us to treasure the people whom he has given to us in our families, including our church family. He reminds us that even though sin will get in the way of the peace and harmony in a family, he urges us to make it a number one priority to bring healing and restoration to our relationships through forgiving one another.

May the brilliant light of Jesus' love for you embrace you and enable you to seek peace and harmony in every situation! Amen.