

## The Process Of Reconciliation – Teresa Holden

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Lamentations 3:19-26; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

In the summer of 2013, I attended Duke Divinity School’s Center for Reconciliation Summer Institute with my colleagues and friends Pedro, Elizabeth and Kent Dunnington. There we learned a process for facilitating reconciliation. I would like to consider today’s Scriptures through this lens of reconciliation, as a way to help us to consider our role in reconciliation, whether it be our own personal need to reconcile with God or with people from whom we are estranged, or on a macro level—our national need to reconcile with those who have experienced discrimination or oppression.

The first step in this process of reconciliation is to respond to God by becoming a *new creation*. As a new creation we receive forgiveness from God. We gain awareness of the need for reconciliation with God and others. In Luke 17:4 (which precedes what the lectionary gives us), Jesus tells the disciples about His standard for forgiveness, which is to always grant forgiveness to those who ask for it. The example He gives is to grant the same person forgiveness seven times even within the same day. Because this standard seems so difficult to them, the disciples in verse five exclaim, *Increase our faith!* Forgiveness is difficult both to ask for and to receive, and it stretches our faith beyond what we could attain without God’s help. Forgiveness and faith are both components in being a *new creation*.

II Timothy 1:7 points out the fact that it also takes courage to walk in faith, as Paul exhorts Timothy to be courageous (the opposite of having a *spirit of cowardice*). Biblical scholar Christopher Hutson places the word *cowardice* into cultural context, saying that philosophers at the time used the word “coward” to indicate someone who “retreats in the face of hardship.”<sup>1</sup>

My mental image of retreating in the face of hardship involves my daughter, Lindsey, who has proven herself to be a very brave person in remarkable ways. However, she is terrified of shots. Because most everyone in our family has asthma, it’s important for us to get a flu shot every year, and each year (even to this day) it is quite an act of bravery for Lindsey. In one instance, however, she did not act so bravely. When she was about eight, my husband, Dave, took the girls down to Watson’s Drug Store to get their flu shots. They stood in line for a little bit and watched the needle be pressed into the flesh of other people. This gave the experience a bit of a dramatic twist as it gave the girls time to contemplate their own moment of truth. When it was their turn, our younger daughter, Ashley, who has never been fazed by getting shots, marched up first and submitted her arm to the needle. Next, it was Lindsey’s turn; she stepped up to the nurse, but before the nurse could grasp her arm, she bolted. Lindsey ran away to the furthest corner of the store, and then ran again when my husband approached her. My children grew up in this church, and most everyone here knows two things about them—they were always reasonably obedient, non trouble-making children, and all three of them were blessed with the gift of speed, which Lindsey exhibited in that moment. Visualizing my lumbering and mild-mannered husband facing this unexpected development and trying to corral the escapee is a very funny image in my mind (especially because I didn’t have to deal with this situation). Lindsey’s childish reaction to getting her flu shot exemplifies the opposite of what God calls us to do, but we can all understand how she was feeling. Reconciliation requires that we not run away from what is

difficult. Fear can turn us in a direction away from faith and reconciliation.

The next step in reconciliation is lamentation, a time during which we gain awareness about and grieve the events that have created divisions between others and ourselves. The prophet Habakkuk gives voice in our lectionary passage to deep lamentation. Very little is known about Habakkuk, but experts believe because of the language he uses that he must have been a Levite, a class of people who were set apart to serve in the Temple, sort of an intermediary between the people and the Jewish priests. Levites had an interest, as well, in political matters. In our reading from Habakkuk we hear his frustration with the violence that he sees all around him. He describes a situation in which injustice seems to be pervasive. He laments the distance this has created from God. This state of affairs is the opposite of God's will, as Habakkuk knows, because everything about Old Testament law is based upon the fact that God is perfectly just.

Lamentation is painful because it revisits the reason why people are estranged, even enemies. Yet this step is important for true reconciliation to occur. After we lament, however, God leads us to hope, exactly like what we see here in our Lamentations passage. Hope is the third step in the process of reconciliation. We are reminded all over again that the path toward healing is through God's love and mercy to us. Lamentations 3: 22-23 tells us: *the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; [God's] mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is [God's] faithfulness*. This is hopefulness that is grounded in the fact that God cares for us, responds to our faith and can lead us to reconciliation.

The final step in reconciliation is spirituality, which leads us to see God's path forward. This requires reflection and prayer to know how to enter fully into God's ministry of reconciliation. As I consider people whom I met at the Summer Institute, I can see the creative hand of God in their paths of reconciliation: Jonathon Wilson-Hartgrove's path has led him and his family to live and work in community with people who are homeless and recovering from addictions in Durham, North Carolina. The School for Conversion, which he founded and has a central mission of ministering in prisons, has as its theme, "Making Surprising Friendships Possible." John Perkins has led Mendenhall Ministries for almost 45 years, bringing Jesus' love and drawing diverse groups to help fight racism and to facilitate economic development in the community of Mendenhall, Mississippi. David Bailey is a worship leader based in Richmond, Virginia who founded Arrabon, an organization that works with churches to develop cross-cultural engagement and worship. Jim Abbott is a retired Episcopal priest who in 2011 led 600 Episcopalians in the Diocese of Western North Carolina through a "Service of Repentance, Healing and Reconciliation" for the participation of the diocese in slavery and policies of segregation.

Acts of reconciliation can be big or small. This past week my "Long Civil Rights Movement" class participated in a small act of reconciliation through a liturgy that I wrote to mark the end of our unit on lynching. For a couple of weeks we read Ida B. Wells' 1895 journalistic account of lynching called The Red Record. In this work Wells chronicles thousands of lynchings that occurred in most states of the Union during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Vigilante mobs, whole communities of people (men, women and children), inflicted this violence mostly against black males, ignoring due process and the citizenship rights of the victims. On our last day of covering this in class we watched a short movie that shows postcards of lynchings made

by celebratory communities to demonstrate the social control they had achieved. It seemed appropriate that we would turn to Scripture and prayer as we intellectually and emotionally wrestled with this part of US history. We used today's Habakkuk passage to help us express our frustration and the heaviness of our hearts, and we prayed for the forgiveness of our nation for allowing these sins. Using today's Lamentations passage reminded us of the hopefulness that we have because God meets us every morning and allows us to pursue and spread the love of Christ.

Our church has embarked on a ministry of reconciliation also in small and big ways. It's important for us to recognize that we are part of a much bigger movement that God is leading—one that reaches across our nation and the world. This movement doesn't have a name, but it is comprised of people who also have committed themselves to God's purpose of reconciliation. This may not be immediately apparent to us as we go about the work that is before us every day, but with this in mind we must rely courageously and faithfully on God to continue to reveal our part in this creative process.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hutson, "Was Timothy Timid? On the Rhetoric of Fearlessness (I Corinthians 16:10-11) and Cowardice (II Timothy 1:7), *Biblical Research* 42. 58-73.