

Getting forgiveness (Matthew 18:15-20)

Christ's love binds up our broken hearts and broken ways.

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Angie called in a panic. "Can you come to the hospital? The nurse says dad doesn't have long. He wants to see you."

Angie's parents were lifelong members of the Lutheran congregation I serve as pastor. Betty had died six months earlier, and through that crucible of care and mourning I had become well acquainted with Angie and her father, Earl.

I arrived at the hospital. Angie hugged me at the door of Earl's room and then stepped into the hallway to give us privacy. Earl sat propped up in the hospital bed, his eyes glassy but relatively alert. He nodded to me in recognition as I pulled a chair to his bedside. I got right to the point.

"Hi, Earl. Angie said you wanted to see me."

His eyes welled with tears as he confessed, "I need forgiveness, but I can't get it."

I reached for his hand and smiled reassuringly, "Oh, Earl. God's forgiveness is a gift. You can always ask for and receive God's free gift of mercy and forgiveness."

Earl shook his head, no. "I need forgiveness from Betty. I missed my chance to say I'm sorry and make it up to her. What if she's mad at me when I see her in heaven?"

I didn't know what to say. We sat in silence for a moment.

“Well,” I said, tentatively, “perhaps we could imagine her here, in this room. You could confess what’s on your mind. You could ask for God’s forgiveness.” Earl shifted his gaze from me to the corner of the room.

“Can you see her?” I asked. Earl nodded.

“What would you like to say?”

A gush of words flowed from Earl, cataloguing his regrets and missteps in their life together: moments of shame, missed opportunities to do right, and words he regretted saying. I listened calmly, a witness to his pain and human brokenness, absorbing his words of confession. As his words trickled to a stop, he concluded, “I’m so sorry.”

Holding his right hand in my left and placing my right hand on his shoulder, I spoke slowly and firmly, “Earl, on behalf of God in Christ, I declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins. Depart in peace.” Earl squeezed my hand in a nonverbal amen.

We sat silently for a few moments, as the mid-afternoon sun filled the room with warmth and light. I caught Earl’s eye and made a confession of my own.

“Earl, I’m not sure how heaven works, but I have a feeling that although forgiveness is a gift, reconciliation is a job. You and Betty have some work to do in heaven.”

Earl smiled, “I’m ready.”

The work of holy reconciliation in Matthew 18 finds its roots in the gracious gift of God’s mercy. Christ’s love binds up our broken hearts and broken ways. It frees us to reconnect with one another, even when we fail again and again. Till our final breath, God is in our midst and calls us to persistent creativity in reuniting.

A few hours later, Angie called to say that Earl had died. I imagined that what he had bound on earth would be bound in heaven.

All names and some identifying details have been changed.