***SOME REPAIRS NEEDED***

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Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2 and Matthew 5:21-24

In a recent article entitled, “In Praise of Repair Culture,” Peter Mommsen recalls the example of his grandfather who was committed to making furniture, toys, and play equipment that was durable and could be easily repaired. He notes how different his grandfather’s practice is from our modern culture’s proclivity for discarding things and asks, “What if we fixed them instead?” There was a time when pretty much everything from cars to appliances to shoes were repaired rather than tossed aside, but that is more the exception than the rule today. Planned obsolescence is a business strategy to encourage more sales with little regard for the impact of the resulting refuse. Some of you are deftly able to fix things – be it a torn shirtsleeve, a malfunctioning appliance, or a cantankerous lawn mower – but not all of us are so gifted, and replacements often seem to be a simpler, cheaper alternative. Yet what happens when all those discarded objects pile up, fill our landfills, leak into our water tables, and leave less greenspace and clean water for living? Might we then consider the impact on the environment that our throwaway choices have, and begin to recycle and repair instead of replace?

The practice of repairing can extend to more than just things. Mommsen says that his father’s attitude toward things extended in one important aspect toward people as well – in the repairing of broken relationships. His Christian faith taught him to work at repairing broken relationships through daily forgiveness. And I wonder: Do you follow his example and work to repair relationships that are broken, or do you toss them aside as you do other things that are no longer working for you? “*The Christian story about the world is all about repair,”* suggests Mommsen*. “The great theme of the Old and New Testaments becomes God’s repair plan for his marred handiwork*.”[[1]](#endnote-1) What he suggests is that God works in and through us to repair damage done to the world but also to repair the damage done in our relationships with one another and with God.

In one of the creation stories in Genesis, God determines that it is not good for Adam – literally the *earthling* – to be alone, so after determining that none of the animals, not even the dog, will suffice as man’s best friend, God makes Eve, so that the earthling will have a companion who is “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.” Yet, it is not long until there is temptation, conflict, and brokenness in the relationships of humans to one another and to God. Thus begins God’s work to repair those broken relationships and to guide us in repairing them as well.

Paul speaks directly to this repair work in his letter to the Corinthians, writing: “*In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us*.” Reconciliation is the repair of broken relationships, and our reconciliation with others begins with God’s reconciliation with us. The good news we bear – that message of reconciliation – is that God did not wait for us to come and set things right. God took the initiative. In Christ God came to

a world that was set in its own ways,

a world that was more alienated than reconciled with God,

a world that showed little love for God or neighbor,

a world so broken, so alienated from God, that it put to death the very one who came in God’s name.

God didn’t wait for the world to come to God seeking to repair that broken relationship; God came to the world. God reached out to us with the power of Christ that could break down the walls we had built around us and broke the grip of sin on our lives. In Christ God reconciled us to God’s self – that is, in Christ God set things right once again so that we might live with hope in the sure and certain knowledge of God’s great love for us.

It is no small thing to say that God took that initiative. Even in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the Father runs to embrace the son only after the son has journeyed home, having in the words of the text, “come to himself.” It is that “coming to himself,” that recognition of guilt or regret, that most of us demand prior to any reconciliation. To begin to consider making peace with our enemies we expect some act of contrition, some sign that the other is sorry for what they have done. Yet the Good News of the Gospel is that God waited for no such sign from us; God came to us in Christ “while we were yet sinners.” It wasn’t that God looked down and thought, “*Well, they finally get it. They are sorry for what they’ve done. They want to change their ways. I think I’ll send a messiah to repair the relationship and reconcile them with me. They’re ready*.” No, God sent Jesus into the world to save us despite our reticence to acknowledge our sinfulness and the brokenness of that relationship with God. God sent Jesus to us so that despite our sinfulness we might appreciate how great was the love of God that would take the initiative of grace with us. It is a divine commitment to repair what is broken in us and in our relationship with God, even when we are the ones who have broken it!

Among the Hualapai people in Arizona, Judge Joseph Flies-Away says that when a person commits a criminal act, “People say, ‘He acts like he has no relatives.’”[[2]](#endnote-2) In other words, he acts as if he has no relationships that would require him to be accountable to anyone else. His relationships are all broken. Jesus says that we are all relatives – brothers and sisters in Christ who are accountable to one another and to God. In Christ, God was repairing what is broken in order to restore us to right relationship with God – that is the good news that we bear to the world. But in Christ we are also called to be in right relationship with one another, rather than carrying around toxic grudges that preserve what is broken between us. In our polarized society and broken world, that is a challenge that calls us to be counter-cultural, to be the exceptions to such polarization rather than continuing examples of it. We are called to make repairs and work toward reconciliation with one another, because God has given to us that ministry of reconciliation. It is not easy work, but it is important work if we are to be faithful!

Garrison Keillor tells about two brothers who lived in Lake Wobegon. They were members of a tiny fundamentalist bunch known as the Sanctified Brethren. There was a spirit of self-righteousness among them that defied peacemaking. In the course of time a dispute arose between Brother William Miller and Brother James Johnson. Others were dragged into the dispute, so that the conflict grew. Now Keillor’s Uncle Al had family and friends on both sides, and it broke Al’s heart to see these brothers become enemies. So one fine August Sunday, he tried to make peace between them to restore the love that had been lost. He arranged for them to meet at his home after church – a few Millers and a few Johnsons, gathering not to discuss their differences in doctrine, but simply to enjoy a dinner of Aunt Flo’s famous fried chicken. The two groups of brothers arrived – in separate cars, of course. They came into the house and sat in silence until the call to dinner when they trooped into the dining room around the long table that had been extended with two leaves, so they wouldn’t have to sit close.

Now prayer was a delicate matter. Brethren were known to use prayer before a meal as a platform for their views, so Uncle Al, concerned lest one brother take a prayer and beat the others over the head with it, said, “Let us bow our heads in silent prayer, giving thanks for this meal.” They bowed their heads and closed their eyes, and a long time passed. The old clock ticked on the bureau. A cat walked in, meowed, and left. A child snickered. There were dry sniffs and throat clearings, but no one moved and no one said a word. Soon it was clear that neither side wanted to stop praying before the other. They were seeing who could pray the longest. Brother Miller peeked through his fingers at Brother Johnson, who was earnestly engaged in silent communion with the Lord who agreed with him on so many things, so Brother Miller dove back into prayer, too. Uncle Al finally said “Amen!” to offer them a way out of their deadlock. He said it again, “Amen!”, but it was no use. Neither side would give in. It was becoming the longest table grace in history.

Then Aunt Flo slid her chair back, rose, went into the kitchen, and brought out the food for which they were competing to see who could be more thankful. She set the hot dishes before them. In that moment, a kind of poignant truth settled among them and they could hardly bear it. Tears ran down Brother Johnson’s face. His eyes were clamped shut, and tears streamed down. Brother Miller was weeping too. “It’s true what they say,” observes Keillor. “The smell of fried chicken and gravy made those men into boys again. It was years ago, they were fighting, and a mother’s voice from on high said, ‘You boys stop it and get in here and have your dinners. Now! I mean it.’ The blessed cornmeal crust and rapturous gravy brought the memory to mind. And the stony hearts of two giants melted. They raised their heads and filled their plates and slowly peace was made over that glorious meal.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Sometimes it takes something more than the initiative of either side to bring about reconciliation. Sometimes it takes the aroma of fried chicken or a crisis that brings two enemies together in common cause or the Holy Spirit to melt a frozen heart. Yet sometimes it takes only one party reaching out to the other with an olive branch, with an offer of reconciliation – as God did for us.

It is precisely that initiative Jesus commends to us in his Sermon on the Mount. “*Before you leave your gift at the altar, go and be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come offer your gift*,” he says. “*Take the first step*. Reach out to the one from whom you are alienated, then come offer your gift.” For until then, you are not ready to utter the words we repeat each week, “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

The ministry of reconciliation that we bear is a ministry of grace, a ministry of forgiveness, a ministry of love rooted in God’s love for us and God’s forgiveness extended to us. It is what we should be able to do as Christians, but sometimes we cannot do it on our own. We may need the aroma of fried chicken or a moment of humility or the power of the Holy Spirit to grant us the grace to be reconciled with one another even as God in Christ has been reconciled with us. When then might that reconciliation begin for you? Perhaps – today! Amen

1. Peter Mommsen, “In Praise of Repair Culture”, *Plough Quarterly*: Winter 2024, p. 20 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Id. at 163 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. From Garrison Keillor, “Brethren” in *Leaving Home*, p.161. Quoted in Stephen R. Montgomery, “Fried Chicken and Stony Hearts,” a sermon preached at Idlewild Presbyterian Church, Memphis, TN, 2/3/02. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)