

**What Would It Take For Healing In My Relationships?**  
**Tim Dickau                      James 5:13-18                      January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012**  
**A Betrayal of Trust – What Now?**

A few years back, one of my relatives got involved in a business through a long-time friend, one of her closest friends. Jill had put a couple hundred thousand into this business over the last 5 years so she was heavily invested. One day, her friend came to her and explained how the business had some cash flow challenges in light of its recent expansion and asked her for a temporary loan of 800,000 for one year. He guaranteed her that the company would be able to pay it back as the revenues from the new project started coming in. Now it just so happens that Jill had recently sold her own company for about that money, and had not yet invested the cash long-term, which her friend knew. Since Jill wanted to help this new business over this hump, she loaned the money. As it turned out, her friend had lied to Jill. The company was actually over-leveraged, which it turned out her friend knew full well when he asked for the money. Six months later, the company filed for bankruptcy. Jill lost her money, the money she was hoping to retire on. As she told me this story, she alternated between shaking her head in utter disbelief and sobbing in sadness. She didn't know how she could forgive her friend after this betrayal.

Another story. Some years back, a friend, I'll call him Jack, left me a phone message, desperate to meet. When Jack arrived at my office the next day, he revealed why he was so distraught. Two days earlier, he discovered while on his computer that his wife had been having an affair. In fact, she had carried on three affairs in the past few years, one of which was current. Over the next two hours, Jack poured out his heart, his anger, his questions, his shock, his sadness, mostly while staring at the floor. Then, near the end of our conversation, he looked up from the floor, peered straight at me, and asked, "Do you think there is any chance that we can find healing in our relationship?"

**Healing as a Metaphor for Understanding God's Work in Christ**

For the past two weeks, we have been talking about healing. Healing is one of the most illuminating metaphors or pictures for both understanding and naming our experience of the work of God in Jesus.. The parts and places of our world where God heals are many. Again, our banners name areas of life in which the Biblical story speaks of God's healing work: There is healing in our bodies, both through the work of the Spirit in enabling human discovery and knowledge and the work of the Spirit through healing prayer; there's healing in our relationship with God, overcoming our distorted perceptions, guilt and hurts; there's healing in our emotions through listening, care, breaking of bonds, deliverance; there's healing of the entire creation through humans recovering our role as stewards and through the presence and promise of New Creation. God is a healing God. I know when I start thinking about healing, my mind moves quickly to objections, cases where healing has not yet come, the global scourge of Aids or economic injustice. These are important questions. We need to grapple with them. I trust our home groups will provide one context for asking these questions. Yet, we also want to open our eyes during this series to recognize that the healing work of God is widespread and abundant. Suffering and death are real, but they are not the end of the story. They may be the beginning. Healing – both through human agency and apart from humans – is the work of God. Healing is present. Healing is our future – and the future of creation. Healing is God's passion – and will.

But what about relationships like those I just described, relationships ripped apart by betrayal and anger? Can God heal those relationships? Can God heal Jack and Jill? How could healing possibly happen there? If you've had an experience of betrayal like these, or if you have betrayed someone else, you know that is not an easily answered question.

## **How Wounded Relationships Affect our Whole Being**

I was holding these questions as I came to this passage that Monica had assigned for this subject on relational healing from the letter of James. I want to invite you to hold these questions as we look at this passage together. The first thing that strikes me about this passage is that James connects these different areas of healing together. Like other Biblical writers, James views our body and spirit as a whole, connected. Look with me at these connections.

Notice what he says beginning in verse 13: “Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”

James moves between what we might name as worries and troubles to physical sickness to guilt and shame quite seamlessly. Clearly, he sees all these areas for healing as being connected. After a couple hundred years where we tended to divide physical healing from emotional healing, there is more recently a move back to recognize their inter-connectedness. For example, scientific studies of the brain have affirmed that the physiology of our brains and our behaviour have more than a one-way relationship. Repeated actions – constructive or destructive – can shape the neural pathways of the brain. So, a friend told me recently that after he struggled to take up the practice of prayer every morning for around 9 months, he found that his body began to anticipate this time of meditation and quieted itself. His actions began to reshape his brain. Cool. Truly we are, as the psalmist writes, fearfully and wonderfully created.

I note this inter-connectedness in part because it works the other way too. The ongoing habit of resenting or hating someone will start to impact other parts of your being and life. If you carry around hatred or resentment of someone and think that you can bracket it out and tuck it away safely in some closeted area where it won't affect the rest of our life – well, good luck. I don't think you can do that. Hatred and resentment will eventually affect your physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Healing in our relationships is integral to human wholeness. If you are carrying resentment or hatred, I invite you to begin by admitting it today.

### **Becoming Priests To One Another**

So what are we to do when our relationships need healing? When we have truly been wronged or wronged someone else as in those stories I told you? James' instructions are very simple and forthright. They are the way forward, out of these stuck places. They are based on both *God's will to heal and our calling to be a priestly community*. What do priests do? Priests bring their lives and the world before God, and they bring God to the world. So James writes that if we are troubled, we should pray. If we are happy, offer our praise to God. Bring your sorrow and joy before God. And we don't do this only on our own; we do it for one another. Are you sick? Invite someone to pray for you. Are you carrying burdens? Confess your sins to one another. Be priests to one another, affirming the holy love and forgiveness of God. Simple. Clear.

James summarizes in v. 16. “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” If there is one thing I believe that God wants to do for us as a community through this series it is this: I believe God wants to equip and release us to pray for one another freely. To be priests for one another. Channels of God's healing, mercy and grace. This priestly role is part of what God restores us to through Christ; to be fully human is to take up your priestly calling. If we can move deeper into this priestly role with one another, we will have a great gift to offer our family, our neighbours, our world.

Monica mentioned last week that we have formed a group who have been studying and learning and practising prayer for one another, prayer for healing. While it is good to set aside some for this purpose, all of us can learn to pray for one another. Let's learn together. Don't be afraid to overcome discomfort, or afraid to take the risk of asking one another for prayer. We want to give you that opportunity to pray with someone again today during the communion meal.

### **Three Essential Movements Towards Healing**

James' instructions are clear. Pray for one another. So what do we pray for with one another to find healing in our relationships? In this passage, James names what I believe are two of the three essential movements of prayer that can bring healing in our relationships. Repentance and confession of sin. Receiving forgiveness. And the third, for which we will turn to another passage, extending forgiveness to others. Repentance and confession of sin, receiving forgiveness, extending forgiveness to others.

#### ***1. Extending Forgiveness to Others***

I want to talk about the last one first: extending forgiveness to others. During our communion meal in this season of Epiphany, we are praying the Lord's prayer. It's a dangerous prayer to pray when you are carrying resentment or hatred because you pray this one line. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors". Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Jesus expanded on this statement in his parable about a man who was forgiven a massive financial debt, who then went out and demanded a small debt from someone who couldn't repay. The consequences for this man are not good. Nor are the consequences for society as a whole when this response of retribution and hatred is common. Why is Jesus so hard-line on this call to extend to others the forgiveness that we receive? Because Jesus could see that this way of unforgiveness would eventually lead his people, personally and corporately, to self-destruction. From Jesus' perspective, forgiveness is like the air in your lungs: there's only room for you to inhale the next lungful of air when you've breathed out the previous one. If you insist on withholding forgiveness, you won't be able to take in more in yourself, and you will suffocate very quickly. The opposite is true too. If we are open to forgiving others, you will also be more open and able to receive God's forgiveness and love for yourself.

So what does forgiving others actually look like? How do we do it when we are so hurt and mad that we want to smash a few pots?

One way to envision what forgiveness looks like is to first envision what it does NOT look like. Here are some common ideas around forgiveness that I think are misleading at best and harmful at worst.

a. *Forgiveness is a decision. Forgiveness is a decision.* Where this can be misleading is that forgiveness of severe wrongs is a decision of the will, but it also especially involves a process – a process that includes many decisions. There are stages that someone choosing to forgive a severe wrong will go through such as hurting. And reacting to the hurt – all those range of feelings of the two people whose stories I told at the beginning. You can't just vault over these feelings. And then letting go of the hurt. Forgiveness can involve many decisions.

b. *Forgiveness lets the offender off the hook. Forgiveness lets the offender off the hook* Forgiving someone is not about papering over cracks. The truth is that forgiving someone, especially someone who is not repentant, involves confronting and naming this wrong. For example, take a look at the first verses in James 5 where James confronts rich oppressors.

If you think James' is light on confronting offenders, listen to these words. "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days." Naming and confronting wrong, both personally and corporately, is part of the path of forgiveness.

In his instructions to people who have been wronged in Matthew's gospel, chapter 18, Jesus lays out a very concrete plan or process. First, talk to the person one on one, then if you don't get anywhere, take another person with you, and then if you still can't resolve it, bring the issues to the assembly. Then, and only then, with the discernment of the whole group, would you consider excluding the person. And not with the purpose of banishing them but of compelling them face their wrongdoing. If your goal in confronting people is to get back and them and make them pay, you're still stuck.

One of the key steps on the path to forgiveness in both those stories I told you in is that the wounded parties had the opportunity to confront the wrongdoer and tell them how their actions had affected them. Forgiveness is a process and a goal.

Now, a word of warning here. Most situations that call us to forgive others are not so clear cut as those scenarios I presented. Often, there is wrongdoing on both sides. One of the reasons that we need to invite others into our wounded relationships – whether as friends, spouses, workmates – is that it often requires wisdom and discernment to figure out what is one person's responsibility to deal with and what is the others'. of our priestly function is to help one another discern and discover the truth. In this sense, forgiveness is more an art than a mechanical tool. It is an art we learn as we keep practising forgiveness.

c. One last idea about forgiveness that can be misleading. *You cannot forgive someone if they won't apologize. You cannot forgive someone if they won't apologize.* This statement requires a more nuanced response. Can you forgive someone if they don't repent? Yes. Otherwise, the person who harmed you continues to harm you. Lewis Smedes says this: "The person who hurt us should not be the person who decides whether or not we should recover from the pain. We should not be kept from healing by the mule-headedness of someone who wronged us and won't own up to it." Ironically, forgiving the wrongdoer sets the wronged free, free from the hold the wrong-doer has on them. When Jill forgave her friend for swindling that money from her, it enabled her to move on, to quit obsessing about the lost money, to live freely and well with what she had left. If she didn't forgive, that event could weigh her down for the rest of her life. Merely "moving on" -- often our first thought when wounded by a person or group -- wouldn't have helped Jill either because the wound, the burden, is still there, and still debilitating. It's forgiving her wrongdoer that will free her. You don't need to wait for someone to apologize to forgive them.

Does that mean that you can be reconciled with someone who won't repent? Not always. Take the story of the spousal betrayal. Jack may forgive his wife, but if she won't acknowledge that her affairs were wrong and damaging, reconciliation is unlikely. If she won't break off the affair, reconciliation is near impossible. While we can choose to forgive someone, they can choose not to be reconciled to us.

Here's the thing: Because God links our reception of mercy to our offering mercy to others, the question to ask our selves is this: am I walking down the road of forgiveness? Or am I merely walking away?

## ***2. Confession and Repentance***

The road to healing in our relationships requires us to forgive our wrongdoers. What if we are the wrongdoer? What if we are the unfaithful spouse, the lying friend? Then the road involves confession and repentance, telling the truth about what we've done and turning away from our wrongdoing and turning towards God in obedience. The temptation, of course, is to do the opposite – to justify, blame, deflect. Like the Boston Bruins coach Claude Julien after his player Brad Marchand illegally clipped Vancouver Canuck Sami Salo, blaming Salo for Marchand's illegal and dangerous hit. Shameless. You'd never catch a Canuck coach doing that.

Joking aside, my homer comment there reveals why confession can also be necessary when you are the one who is wronged. Because the wrong done to you can result in you wronging others in reaction. If Jill goes around badmouthing her friend and not dealing with her anger, the community splinters further. Healing in relationships will require us to also confess our harmful reactions to the wrong done to us. If we don't break the cycle of harmful reactions, they become nuclear and spread everywhere.

I noticed a few of you took the opportunity to hear Ray Aldred and Terry LeBlanc a couple weeks ago when they spoke here at a Saturday Seminar on reconciliation between first nations and other Canadians. It seems to me that if we are going to find reconciliation, those of us who are not first nations need to make more effort to acknowledge and name the wrongs done in our history. Confession – and repentance – can open the door to healing. Blessed are the peacemakers.

## ***3. Receiving Forgiveness***

And once we do confess and repent, an important step is to receive forgiveness. This is an area where our priestly function with one another is vital. Even though the one we have offended may not forgive us or be reconciled to us, God will forgive us. I know in my own life that for some of my sin, some of my wrongdoing, it was only when I prayed with another person, and heard the words of forgiveness from their lips, that I was able to receive it myself. And truly move forward. Hear James' words again: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”

## ***A Different Kind of Love***

These are three movements that can heal broken relationships: Confession and repentance, receiving forgiveness and forgiving others. Do you need to make one of those moves today?

Before we move to the communion meal and the opportunity to pray with one another, I want to make one last comment. It is this: all significant relationships between humans will eventually have some disappointment, frustration, difficulties – some need for healing. At least all the significant relationships I've had. When someone says “I love you” before we have gotten to that stage of the relationship where we disappoint or hurt each other, I wonder what they mean by those words. Do they mean the commonly bandied cultural notion of love – love that says “I want to be in relationship with you as long as you make me feel good, or as long as you meet my expectations and don't disappoint me.” That kind of love won't cut it. It won't cut it in our families, our friendships, our workplaces. It won't cut it in communities, in our church community, where we are often offended not by what others do but by what they don't do, because they don't meet our expectations. That kind of contractual love won't bring healing.

The love revealed in Jesus, the love of the Trinitarian God, is altogether other, different. This God, Paul says, loved us while we were yet his enemies, estranged from God. Jesus died for us, after humans had disappointed him, knowing that we would disappoint him too. This God prays from the cross, while being wrongly accused and murdered, "Father, forgive them." This is love that heals.

Can we really continue to breathe out forgiveness apart from receiving this amazing divine grace? Can Jack and Jill, broken people who came crashing down the hill, find healing without forgiving love?

As we come to the communion table, I want to invite you to bring your life before God. If there is one of these moves you need to make tonight – a move towards confession, receiving or extending forgiveness – I invite you to make that move tonight. I invite you to pray with someone else so that we can be priests to one another. You may feel like you don't have the power to forgive. But Jesus, who emerged victorious over the incredible wrong done to him, has power you don't.

On the night....

## James 5

- Different areas of healing are inter-connected

Implication: we need to deal with our broken relationships

- Pray for one another; Recovering our Role as a priestly community

## Three Movements Towards Healing of Relationships

1. Forgiving Others
2. Confession and Repentance
3. Receiving Forgiveness

## Three misleading ideas about forgiving others

- a. Forgiveness is a decision.*
- b. Forgiveness lets the offender off the hook*
- c. You cannot forgive someone if they won't apologize.*

Is there a move you need to make to find healing in your relationships tonight?