

Bolton United Church
February 23, 2025
Text: Genesis 45:3-11

RECONCILIATION VS RECRIMINATION

The story of Joseph's reconciliation with his brother is an amazing one. I know it's familiar to many of you, but I'll just remind you of it anyway in terms of reminding you of the context. Joseph was his father's favourite son and after several instances of revealing his dreams to his brothers and showing that they were big things ahead for him, they got upset and sold him into slavery in Egypt. Well, that was after they had thrown him into a deep pit. And after being there for several days they had a little bit of remorse and decided to sell him into slavery. What a lovely thing for brothers to do, huh?

Anyways.

We are here after time has passed. Joseph has experienced some really hard things, and at this point life has finally been good to Joseph. He has risen to a place of prominence in Pharaoh's Court, and now has the ability to save the lives of his brothers and by extension, his father. And that's what he chooses to do. He chose the path of reconciliation.

At the first revelation of who he was, Joseph's Brothers are stunned.

They were speechless.

They couldn't say a word. They couldn't believe what they were hearing and seeing.

And knowing what they did, they knew that recrimination would've probably been OK. They probably deserved it.

Instead, Joseph showed Mercy, protecting his people from likely death. He offered them a lifeline, and endemic therein, is a path to reconciliation. Reconciliation is not what they expected, in fact, they expected recrimination. But they got kindness.

Last year October, I had the privilege of visiting Halifax in Nova Scotia for the first time since I have lived in Canada. I did this as part of the military exercise for chaplains in the Canadian Armed Forces, as I am The United Church of Canada's point person for our chaplains who serve.

One afternoon I took the opportunity to visit Africville. This was a black Canadian city, founded in 1749, when enslaved African people dug out roads and built much of the city - a place where they could call home.

What an amazing experience that was for me!

To be in this place where black settlers bought land, set up a church, the Seaview United Baptist Church, had their own school, ran fishing businesses from the Bedford basin, ran farms, and several opened small stores toward the end of the 19th century. It was home for them.

It was a haven from the way they were treated in Halifax. In the city itself, black women were only able to find work as domestic servants, and black men were limited to finding positions such as sleeping car porters on the train.

But when they were at home in Africville, they were comfortable, they were their own strong human beings. Children swam in Tibby's pond and played baseball in Kildare's field. In winter,

everyone played hockey on the pond when it froze! They had a hockey team called “Brown Bombers”, long before some of the others!

Go Canada!

There was a strong connection to music. Duke Ellington’s father-in-law was from Africville and the duke visited and stayed with family. It was a happening place, on a beautiful location.

What I learned from the museum that now exists in the Baptist Church, which has been repurposed, is that the city of Halifax collected taxes in Africville, but no services were provided to the residence there. No paved roads, no running water, no sewage system.

Instead, a railway was cut through the village, destroying some homes in its path. The homeowners were not paid. Instead, the city of Halifax placed a fertilizer plant, slaughter houses, the RockHead prison, the night-soil disposable pits (human waste), and infectious diseases hospital in the area surrounding Africville.

In the 1950s an open pit garbage dump was built in Africville. As one alderman claimed, “it was a health menace, and should not be placed in other areas of Halifax.”

All of this led to the eventual declaration of this thriving community as a slum and it was ordered demolished in the 1960s. In 1969 the final property was demolished and the last of Africville’s residents relocated.

The land where Africville once stood was turned into private housing, ramps for the A. Murrat Mackay Bridge, and the Fairview commercial terminal.

Well, this was painful for survivors of that forced relocation as that sense of community could never be regained, as people were dispersed and forced to live separately, in communities with people that did not understand them.

One thing that these community members did was to start advocating for themselves, and so in 2010, after lots of advocacy, the Halifax regional municipality mayor apologized for the destruction of Africville, and committed to the restoration of the Baptist Church.

Another thing the folks from Africville and their descendants continue to do, is to return to this site every summer for a big get together. A grand picnic. Where the generational connections can be renewed, and the story told. Every 10 years there is a weeklong celebration.

There’s cooking, music, storytelling, dancing, bringing back a sense of what was in this place.

I did not experience all of that, as I visited in October, but what I did experience was the spirit of the place. The spirit of Africville. Standing in that restored Baptist Church, walking through the park under the trees, standing on the mounds which overlook the basin, where folks would have fished or swam, looking across to the bridge. One of those ramps, now exist in what used to be Africville. I feel the spirit of the people. I feel the spirit of those who lived there. I feel the spirit of those who were forced to move.

And I feel the spirit of this woman. Who was a child in the 60s when their lives changed. But she is determined to let the spirit of love and reconciliation guide her actions. As she offered the tour of the museum, which included pictures of her and another tour guide, as children in their homes in the town as it was back in the day, they are about reconciliation.

They were very clear that continuing to exist in a spirit of bitterness would not serve them nor their families nor their culture very well. They will continue to tell their story, but they will do so in the Hope that reconciliation will be a continuing theme.

And so back to Joseph. Without having heard of the golden rule, Joseph was living out what Jesus told his disciples – and you know the golden rule – do unto others as you would have them to you. That's in the gospel, in the lectionary reading for this morning, which we didn't read, but it's pretty familiar to some people here. Jesus actually encourages us to take the golden rules to the next step. Saying we should forgive first, love first and give first. Do good and trust the Lord. Joseph wanted reconciliation to be the continuing theme. He did not want recrimination. He wanted to offer forgiveness first. He didn't wait to be asked. He wanted to offer love first, and give first.

I know it's not easy.

Families.

Not usually the easiest places within which to spread love and forgiveness and reconciliation.

And I feel like it is in those situations that we are asked to be our best selves.

Whether it's at the work family, the immediate family at home, the extended family, the CHURCH family. Reconciliation not recrimination.

This week, as you go out into your own situations, I invite you to think about the examples of Joseph and his brothers, and the folks of Africville, and live in such a way that reconciliation is possible.

Offer forgiveness first.

Offer love first.

For that's what Jesus would do.

Amen

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