

Will you persevere in resisting temptation and seek one another's forgiveness and God's?

We will with God's help.

This week an air hockey table was donated to the youth room at Good Shepherd. And, while looking for inspiration about how to begin this sermon I, for the first time in quite some time played air hockey. Growing up in Minnesota one receives some knowledge of hockey-how-to regardless of if you have ever been on skates or played the sport. But still, returning to the air hockey table I noticed I was not so polished a player as in the prime of my youth. Two conclusions came from this foray back into air hockey playing. First, I'm glad to share with all of you, before this challenge is extended and while they have now let me be in Communion Café without other staff, that the formation team (that is me, Mike Peterson with the youth and Aimee Bostwick Director of Programs) hope to challenge the rest of the Good Shepherd staff to an air hockey tournament. The second is that in this stewardship season, I am grateful for the donation of this air hockey table.

For all its spiritual riches, there was not an air hockey table at Lambeth palace. Lambeth Palace is the home of Archbishop Justin Welby and where I lived last year with the Community of St Anselm.

Archbishop Justin is the Archbishop of Canterbury--the symbolic head or focus of the Anglican Communion—and one of his three priorities is reconciliation, the others are prayer and the renewal of religious life and evangelism--reconciliation ties into the promise we just renewed: will you seek one another's forgiveness and God's. Living in his home last year the Community I lived with participated regularly in reconciliation among those of us living closely together. Reconciliation happens at a number of different levels—there is global reconciliation—between nations, between religions. There is the local level—often involving the history of a place. There is a familial level—among family members or community members or staff members. And there is a personal level—reconciliation with our self and Reconciliation with God. There is no shortage of reconciliation we can be a part of.

And last year I would participate in afternoons and evenings devoted to familial and personal reconciliation. This happened in a chapel—and so the conversations shared with those I lived with were shared in front of God. Some of these were difficult and all were at least slightly uncomfortable conversations. It seemed that some reconciliation was impossible without God's presence with us.

And the Gospel we hear today, the Prodigal Son and his older brother, is, what I have found to be one of the most powerful entry points into the wideness of God's mercy and forgiveness that we have. It shows God's endless desire to be reconciled with us.

I was introduced to a painting last year. There have been many paintings of the prodigal son, some more known than others, and this one stuck me. I cried more than I had in years after some time praying with this painting by Charles Mackesy. The words in the background of this one say: This is the story of the prodigal daughter. It should really be called the Running father who waited every day for his girl to return. The one who had rejected him so badly and finally when he saw her from a long way off—his father ran to her and hugged her and kissed her.

This is a story of forgiveness and even with the slight turn from son to daughter I hope shows an entry point for all of us into a story that shows how much God wants to forgive and reconcile with us.

And our baptismal promise this week is about resisting temptation and seeking one another's forgiveness and God's. There are many different ways and things that can tempt us. They can do damage to our lives and to the lives of our families. Yet, I think the temptation that can perhaps most deeply hinder our desires, our will, our longing to be reconciled with ourselves, those around us and with God is the temptation not to believe that God really runs to us like the Father in our gospel. The temptation not to believe that when we turn away from God we are able to be not only forgiven but celebrated for our return.

God's capacity for forgiveness is endless—that means it is far more than we can understand, we can comprehend, we can even justify or reason. God's capacity to reconcile with those who, like the painting says, reject him so badly, is overflowing.

We can revisit this promise, I hope, seeing that there are temptations that take us away from God and there are temptations that try to keep us away. It is our faith, which we have been gifted with—in our own hearts but also in our scripture, in our gospel, that says we can be reconciled to God.

And it is our stewardship promise because this is a gift, an offering, as Christians we give to the world we live in. It is challenging and I think that is a way we know it is really from God. We are called, like God, like this Father in the gospel, to forgive and to reconcile.

It is the tendency today, part of human nature it seems, that we get upset at people who wrong us. That once someone wrongs us they are written off our list. Kept at a distance until we forget them.

Today when someone disagrees with us, when someone sees the world differently than us the reaction seems to be to quickly jump to conclusions of who they are, how wrong they are, and how much more we understand or know. A divide goes up between those who are like minded and those who are different. We close the door to someone who walks away from the path we are on.

And this is all a part of stewardship because reconciliation and forgiveness are our offerings as Christians. This is a part of love that isn't easy, that doesn't at first look joyful, or happy, or bright. It takes work and it takes prayer, and it often takes God's grace to be an agent of reconciliation, an instrument of forgiveness.

Like our Corinthians passage said: God has entrusted the message of reconciliation to us. Reconciliation and forgiveness is not only what we receive from our God but also what we give to the world.

Sam Wells, an Anglican Ethicist gives a definition of reconciliation: Reconciliation is not the restoration of an untroubled condition before a conflict; it's the creation of something that might never have been without that conflict.

Things don't go back to the way things once were with the prodigal son and his older brother. This family relationship doesn't look the same but there is something new and hopeful with these reconciled relationships. Something new is created and it takes work. The older brother and younger brother must learn to live together again. The younger brother must remember what it is like to be obedient to his father. Reconciliation is not the restoration of an untroubled condition before a conflict; it's the creation of something that might never have been *without* that conflict.

And we follow a God who runs towards us. No matter how we have given into temptation, or fallen away or run off. God sees all we do and still loves us. This is, ours is the story of the Running father who waited every day for his boy or girl to return. The one who had rejected him so badly and finally when he saw him from a long way off—his father ran to her and hugged him and kissed her.

God came to us through Jesus and continues coming to us through our gospels, through those we meet, through those who reconcile with us and who we reconcile with. Our message, our gift is to know better this God who runs to us, to believe in this God who waits for us to turn to him. *And then* to try and do the same, as best we can with those around us. It does not need to be *our* response to respond with hate or division. Just because everyone else is, doesn't mean we have to, too.

Reconciliation is not easy and requires practice like anything else—piano, math or air hockey. Practice is a surefire way to get better at something and we can begin today, listening to the things we say that may cause another to feel cast off or far away—and--changing our actions and words towards the embrace of another, the forgiveness of another. May our God who's for us mercy is endless inspire us to grow in forgiveness and begin works of reconciliation. Our actions make a difference and we can begin

this giving, this offering of reconciliation and forgiveness that builds up ourselves and our communities.

In prayer let us seek to understand this truth of God's mercy more and then with confidence know that

our God comes running towards us, too.