

“Leaving Before the Benediction”

Matthew 5:21-26

1st Sunday in Lent

February 22, 2026

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

I’m going to give you permission today to do something I’ve never explicitly encouraged from any church’s pulpit before.

I mean, it’s your lucky day.

What do you have permission to do today?

You are free to leave early.

Now...a large part of me does NOT want to say it.

I’m not eager for anyone to leave worship early.

(And besides, I really need you around for the congregational meeting after worship today...I don’t want to lose the quorum and have to reschedule the meeting yet AGAIN.)

But if I’m going to be faithful to this morning’s text, I need to make sure you understand that if the Spirit moves you, you can leave before the service is over.

Heck, maybe even before this sermon is over.

There’s just one condition.

I’ll share that condition in a little bit.

But I want to begin this morning with the late actor, Robert Duvall. He was in some of my favorite movies when I was growing up, but I was surprised to read in his obituary this past week that he only won ONE Oscar in his career.

It was for the movie *Tender Mercies*.

I’m dating myself here, but did any of you ever see that film?

It told the story of a drunk, burnt-out country western singer named Mac Sledge. Mac's life and career are in shambles until he comes across a young widow named Rosa Lee.

Mac needs a place to stay, so he does chores around the house in exchange for a room. Before too long, the two fall in love, get married, and ever so slowly, Mac pieces his life back together under the care of Rosa Lee and her small, tender acts of mercy.

Right at the point that Mac's life is turning around, however, his 18-year-old daughter from a previous marriage comes to visit.

Sue Ann is her name.
They haven't spoken in years.
She's a visible symbol of the earlier family that Mac helped destroy.

At first, they don't know what to say to each other, but then Mac staggers out some words of remorse and repentance, and there is a whiff of forgiveness in the room.

As Sue Ann is about to leave, she asks Mac:

"Do you remember that song you used to sing to me? When I was a little girl—something about a dove, the wings of a snow white dove?"

"No," Mac replies. "I don't remember."

And then, as Mac watches Sue Ann drive away, he begins to sing to himself:

"On the wings of a snow white dove, God sends his love..."

What's intriguing about that scene is why Mac did NOT tell his daughter that he DID remember the song.

Was he afraid of where it might lead?

Was he scared of the old wounds cropping up, wondering if he gets a second chance to be her father again, will he just end up hurting her again?

It's a scene that beautifully captures both the promise and the difficulty when it comes to **reconciliation**.

That's our topic for today.

Reconciliation.

According to Jesus, there's nothing more important:

“So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

Please note what Jesus does NOT say.

Jesus does not say:

“...if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, finish worshiping God, go run your errands, take your child to soccer practice, and then, if you have the time and the energy, go reconcile with your brother or sister...”

Jesus says, “leave your gift before the altar and go...”!!

There's a sense of urgency here.

Nothing takes higher priority than making peace, mending fence, putting together the broken pieces of our most important relationships.

To which I say, easier said than done, Jesus.
Easier said than done.

Last summer, the writer David Litt published an essay about his relationship with his brother-in-law, Matt.

“Not too long ago, I felt a civic duty to be rude to my wife’s younger brother, Matt...I met him in 2012, and it was immediately clear we had nothing in common. He lifted weights to death metal; I jogged to [Stephen] Sondheim....he was a huge Joe Rogan fan...”

David was on the other side of the political fence.

“[When] the pandemic hit...our preferences began to feel like more than differences in taste. We were on opposite sides of a cultural civil war.”

And Litt goes on to describe how he decided to approach Matt throughout the pandemic: with “frostiness.”

It “wasn’t personal. It was strategic,” he writes.
He was trying to get Matt to change his ways.

But of course, it didn’t work.
It only strained their relationship.
Finally, Litt reached the conclusion that “ostracism” wasn’t the way to go.

“I wish I could say I learned this through reflection and study,” Litt writes.

“What actually happened is that I started surfing...Despite my advanced age of 35 and lack of natural talent, I got hooked. Matt was the only other surfer I knew...From the moment we began paddling out together, I could tell my cold-shoulder strategy had backfired.”

But the two kept at it together.

“It helped that...Matt’s a very good surfer...[and] his generosity of spirit in the water [never looking down on me] made me rethink my behavior on land.”

Five years after the pandemic, Litt says:

“[Matt and I] don’t always approve of each other’s choices, but we like each other [now]...When I share stories about surfing with my brother-in-law, people...tell me about relationships in their lives pushed to the brink by politics...More often [than not], they’re hoping for a way forward...”

“Can friendships fractured in [this] era be repaired?”¹

According to Jesus, the answer is yes.
Not just in this era, but any era.

Of course, what’s true about the “David and Matt” story is that they both decided to give it a shot.

And that’s the rub.
Because you and I both know...that’s not always what happens.
Nor is it always the best thing that SHOULD happen.

¹ David Litt, “Is It Time to Stop Snubbing Your Right-Wing Family?”, *The New York Times*, July 13, 2025.

If someone has been abused, it's not up to that person to try to reconcile with the one who has abused them.

If someone has been in relationship filled with conflict and fighting, sometimes the healthiest thing is for both parties to stop wounding one another...not to try an ongoing relationship with the other.

And besides, what are we supposed to do, if the person with whom we try to reconcile wants nothing to do with us?

You see, Jesus didn't just say "Forgive the one who has wounded you."

Jesus said, "Go reconcile."

Frankly, I wish he had stopped at forgiveness.

Jesus knew very well that when it comes to forgiveness, the determining factor is NOT whether the other person apologizes or repents.

The determining factor is our decision.
Our willingness, with the help of God, to let our resentment go.

In other words, forgiveness is a one-way street.

But reconciliation—that's a two-way street.

In order for there to be a restored relationship, BOTH PARTIES need to participate.

I wonder if any of you know the story of Amy Biehl?

Amy Biehl was a 26-year-old American Fulbright scholar who went to South Africa in the early 1990s to help that country with its transition to democracy.

Less than 24 hours before she was going to get on a plane to return to the U.S., she was driving some friends home from work when she stopped at a gas station. An angry mob, which had been riled up at a rally earlier in the day, attacked her car, then they attacked her, then they murdered her.²

Her parents, Linda and Peter Biehl, responded by flying to South Africa, walking the streets where Amy died, and meeting her killers' families. When the four men convicted of Amy's murder applied for amnesty through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1998, Amy Biehl's parents did not oppose it.

In fact, they attended the hearing, and when their daughter's killers were granted amnesty after only 4 years in prison, they welcomed the outcome.

In the years that followed, two of Amy's killers —after their release —came to work for the Amy Biehl Foundation, which Amy's parents had established to help teenagers in the neighborhood where their daughter was killed.

One of them, Ntobeko Peni, became a father, and a mentor to the youth in the neighborhood.

Linda Biehl, Amy's mom, said:

“He could have been in prison. He could be dead. Instead, he's raising a child to participate in this...great country. That brings me joy. Real joy.”³

² Scott Kraft, “South African killers now work on behalf of their victim,” *The Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 2008.

³ [“I Chose To Fill The Void”: Linda Biehl On... | UWC](#)

I think this is why Jesus made reconciliation priority number one.

Not because he believed it's an easy thing for us to do.
But because it's the most JOYFUL thing that God has ever done.

Take a look at your Harbinger for today.
The Call to Worship.
It came from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth.

Let's say it again.
If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:
Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Good...now note what Paul says next.
God has reconciled us to God's self through Christ.

Stop right there!

It doesn't say, "God reached out, and we responded the right way."
Paul doesn't say, "God reached out, and the outcome is undecided."

Paul says, "God has done it."

So...I want you to ask you a deep theological question.
What was the look on God's face when God was reconciling the world to God's self?

Picture it now.

Jesus has been crucified on the cross. He's in the tomb. God is about to raise Jesus, and thereby reconcile the world to God's self.

Was God going...ugh, do I really have to do it?!!
Or was God thinking: It is my greatest JOY to do it!!

Now go back to the last two lines of the Call to Worship, and say them with me one more time:

God has reconciled us to God's self through Christ.
God has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

Did you say it like this?
Or did you say it with joy?

A colleague of mine reports that not too long ago, he was having a conversation with a friend. This friend, this mother, described a recent evening when she was watching television with her teenage son.

She was folding laundry.
Doesn't remember what they were watching—it was something stupid.

And her son made some smart remark.
She didn't like the remark, and she scolded him.
Well, he didn't like being scolded, so he said something even smarter and snarkier.

That really made her mad, so she REALLY scolded him.
And that made HIM really mad.

So he slammed his fist on the coffee table,
and he went upstairs to his room and slammed the door.

And the mother said to herself, “Well, he can just stew in his own juices!”

Translated: He’s in the wrong. I’m in the right!

But then something told her that nothing was more important at that moment than mending fence with her boy.

So she put down her laundry, and put down her pride,
and put down her stubbornness....and she went upstairs
to her son’s room...⁴

I wonder if anyone in this room is being stubborn about a relationship in your right now.

**They’re in the wrong.
I’m in the right.**

Do you remember at the beginning of the sermon, I said that there’s one condition that will let you leave worship early?

That condition, my friends, is STUBBORNNESS.

If you are being stubborn about a relationship...*clinging tightly to the refrain: they are in the wrong, I am in the right*...then you have my permission to leave worship early today, so that you can go work on that relationship, and extend the hand of grace one more time.

There’s just one condition:

⁴ I am indebted to a sermon by Dr. Thomas G. Long for this story.

When you leave the sanctuary, you must leave your stubbornness behind.

Put it down.

Let your stubbornness go.

You see, after worship (& the congregational meeting), our ushers will be more than happy, as they clean up the communion cups, to also collect your stubbornness, to put it in the garbage, along with your stubbornness, and your stubbornness, and my stubbornness....

It'll be one big STUBBORNNESS party!

And it will be taking place in one of our Westminster garbage bins.

Which is a much better place for that party—

than when it takes place in my heart...

or when it takes place in your heart.

Amen.