

A Love Letter
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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2 Cor 2:1-10; Matt 18:21-22

Relationships can be messy. Family ties, friendships, the connection between governments and their citizens, even the relationships we hold within the body of Christ, the church... all can be messy. So it's no big surprise that the second letter to the Corinthians was written to a church who had experienced some sort of damage to their relationship with Paul.

The details are sketchy, but it seems on a previous visit to Corinth Paul had some sort of encounter with one of the members of the congregation that caused him great pain, not just because of the damage which was done, but because the community failed to come to his defense.

After that visit, Paul wrote them another letter which seemed to have caused the Corinthian church to take action against the offending individual, either they sanctioned him, punished or maybe even banned this person from the community.

Hurt people, hurt people. Sometimes groups find relief from pain or division by placing all their anxiety-fueled anger upon a scapegoat... that appears to be what happened in Corinth.

It seems like broken relationships within the church are extra messy, because we hope that the people who make up the body of Christ will know better or act better. We trust that our high expectations and standards will be met by the community of faith. But sometimes we forget walking through the doors of the church building doesn't suddenly turn us into perfect people.

Paul writes from the perspective of one who has been hurt first by an individual and then by a community. He also writes as one who has seen his enemy punished by the community through exclusion. He calls upon them to act boldly. To show forgiveness, offer consolation and reaffirm their love for the individual who has been pushed away.

Unfortunately, human beings, from time to time, still hurt each other. We make decisions from selfish positions. We fear that which is unfamiliar and push away those who are different. We hold onto grudges, disappointments and anger and let those emotions form a barrier wall against the one who (we swear) hurt us first.

We try not to, but we do.

When I think of old hurts I think of my childhood friend. The oldest of two, she considers herself a “survivor” of a childhood riddled with conflict and animosity.

The relationship she had with her mother was terribly unhealthy. My friend’s mother seemed to take delight in putting her daughter down every chance she got, and my friend (who still has quite the colorful vocabulary) would respond in kind.

My friend’s father, a gentle giant of a man, tried to keep the peace in his home but couldn’t, so he often escaped to the yard (or when it was worse, the local bar).

My friend’s younger brother seemed to get through their childhood best, learning to deflect arguments and criticism with his own subtle humor.

I know all about their family dynamic, because I spent much of my free time at their house. I heard their angry tirades against each other. At one point, when we were 15 years old, things got so destructive that my friend moved out of her family home and spent the last two years of high school living with another friend a few miles away.

Neither mother nor daughter wanted anything to do with each other for almost two years. Now in her mid-40’s, a lot has changed in my friend’s life. She went to college, started a career, met a great guy, got married and moved about as far away as it is possible to be from her family and still be in the contiguous United States.

She and her husband are now raising a teenage daughter and younger brother in sunny California, and by all accounts the family is healthy and emotionally stable. Her mother, whose health is fragile right now, visits them a few times a year and they come over to the east coast every once in a while.

The last time my friend was in Connecticut, we tried to meet for coffee. Sadly, her mother prevented us from getting together. It seems that she didn’t want to lose time with her family and complained bitterly to my friend about it.

“Do you mind?” my friend asked me over the phone “you know better than anyone what she’s like... can we get together next time I’m in town?”

My friend has, quite obviously, developed much better ways of coping with her mother as an adult. If a similar thing had happened when we were teens, there would definitely be an argument, possibly some foot stomping and slamming of doors. The destructive patterns we learn in childhood have a way of hanging on.

By some miracle, my friend has developed into an excellent parent and caregiver. Her children both attend arts magnet schools and have rich lives filled with musical theater, sports and scouting. She is active in the PTA and their family calendar is filled with fun social events.

And I wondered. how did my childhood friend manage to shake off the ghosts of the past and break those old habits with her mother? How did she learn to have a healthy relationship with her children?

I was curious, so I asked. My friend told me that in her mid-twenties a wise therapist helped her make reconciliation with her mother a possibility by directing her to write and deliver a "letter of forgiveness". This, in part, is what she wrote:

Dear Mom,

You must have had your hands full with me as a kid. Like, remember the time my brother and I got stuck in a tree while you and dad were out buying groceries? Or that day freshman year when I was caught drinking in the woods behind school? You had to come and pick me up. I knew you'd be angry, and at times like those, you had every right to be.

But to be fair, you were angry pretty often. Even at times you shouldn't have been. Like on those nights you came home from work long after we were supposed to eat together. You'd ask us where dinner was, and you got pretty upset when we told you that we had already eaten and cleaned up and that your plate was in the fridge. No, we didn't wait, and I regret that.

I forgive you for being angry with us.

I bear no ill will towards you for all the times you yelled at us for bringing home bad grades or forgetting to do the laundry. Or those times you told us we were worthless. Or when you told me I was a brat and that my birthday was cancelled.

I forgive you.

I know that deep down you loved us, in your own way. Despite everything, you'd still take us out for an ice cream sometimes. We went on vacation to Lake George every summer. You gave us good advice. I even remember the hugs right before we went to bed when we were little.

And it's true that life wasn't always that way. Nobody's perfect – not you, and not me. I hope that after all we've been through, you've learned as much as I have. And I want you to know that I'm still here for you.

Because no matter what's been said and done in the past, you're still my mom and I'll always be your daughter.

Love, Me

After writing the letter and mailing it to her mom, my friend told me she felt as if a giant weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Almost instantly, she felt better about her life and her future. Her mother called later that week and they had one of the most honest and non-anxious conversations they could have.

And it's all because my friend was willing to give up the need for retaliation and put the heavy burden of her grudge down. Twenty years later, she has built a life focused on joy and family, hope and love. It's hard to believe that one simple letter could really do so much. And I'm not sure how Paul's love letter worked out among the Corinthians. But I do know that my friend's love letter changed her world for the better.

Jesus has commanded us to love our enemies, but he also taught that justice is not a superficial band-aid. It is always tempered by seeking some sort of redemption and restoration both for the offender and the offended-against.

To counteract evil with generosity is transformative for everyone. Paul asks the Corinthians to put aside their desire to punish the offender and, instead, do something far more wonderful. He does not want them to pass up the chance of healing their deep wounds.

The church, our families, our friend groups... they are just made up of imperfect human beings. Yet, through open, honest, and vulnerable communication, with the unity of the body in mind, and the goal of grace-filled reconciliation, true forgiveness may lie ahead.

If Easter and the resurrection are about anything, they are about restoring hope where all had seemed lost, rising from the ashes of our human failure and responding to the call to let love rule. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.