

One day I was working as a hospital chaplain visiting patients, and I met this gentleman for the first time. He was very sick. He was nearing the end of his life, and I asked him about his faith. I asked him about where God was present in his life, and he shared with me this extraordinary moment. He had a wife and children, but he became addicted to drugs. His addiction was very destructive for the life of the family. He was behaving very erratically. He was spending all the family's resources, so his wife felt that for the good of the children, even though she had tried everything she could to help him give up his drug habit, she felt for the good of the children she needed to kick him out of the house.

And so, he lived homeless for many years on the streets. Once while he was homeless, he had a medical emergency and was taken to the hospital. Much to his surprise in the emergency room, his children who had not seen in years came to visit him. He couldn't believe it, and he asked his children, why did they come? And how did they know that he was even there? And his children said that they had put out an alert with the city and the county, and so when he was admitted to the hospital, they were notified. And they, of course, wanted to come and visit.

He said that since he left the house and was living on the streets, his children told him that his wife made the conscious decision to never speak ill of their father. Yes, he had done everything wrong. He had not been present; he was wasting away the resources of the family. But his wife decided consciously that she was not going to complain, and she was not going to speak ill of him to the children.

So, the children wanted to meet him. The children wanted to give him a second chance. They longed for this opportunity for reconciliation. And so, this moment arrived and overwhelmed with the love of his children and his own realization of his drug problem, he was, thanks be to God, able to beat his addiction and able to become present again in the life of his family.

This story reminds me so much of the parable of the Prodigal Son, but in this case it's the story of the prodigal father. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, we hear how the father longed for his son who was lost. He longed for his son who was wasting away the family resources to come home. Here we instead see how the mother of this family is trying to keep the door open for reconciliation; how the mother was open to having the children part of the life of their father again, if the circumstances were healthy and if the circumstances were safe for them.

I'm also reminded of another story when I read this parable in my life of ministry. A few years ago, I was assigned to the cathedral of Grand Rapids as a seminarian, and it was the 500th commemoration of the reformation that began when Martin Luther nailed the theses on the door of the cathedral. Since then, we know Catholics and Lutherans have had many bitter disagreements, even religious wars. But thanks be to God, Catholics and Lutherans have also been able to find areas of agreement and to enter into dialogue to profess a common faith in Jesus Christ. Even though we're not 100 % in agreement on all the theological details, we still had a commemoration of the reformation. We had a prayer service together with Lutherans and Catholics gathering at the Cathedral of Grand Rapids.

As I was going to this special commemoration, outside I saw there were Catholics who were protesting. They were angry that the bishop was allowing these Protestants to come into the Catholic Cathedral, and they were angry about all the past hurts of the reformation. I don't know, to be honest, what these hurts would have been precisely, but there were these Catholics outside protesting. Now when I went inside to this prayer service, the singing was beautiful. It was just wonderful to hear these voices of Catholics and Lutherans singing the hymns that we shared together. And the preaching was great. We grieved over our past hurts, and we also looked ahead to possibilities for reconciliation, to possibilities for collaboration in our ministry and in our mission, and for possibilities to witness together.

From these two stories, I see a common theme emerging. When we look at divisions, we should look at all the reasons why we're angry. We know that anger is a real emotion. Anger can consume us. And anger often stems from good reasons. There are legitimate hurts that are usually behind our anger. But I find that if I look a little bit more closely at those times that I'm angry with other people, I see that that anger often stems from a feeling of sadness, from a sense of brokenness, from a pain from a sorrow that I experienced in a certain relationship.

Whenever I'm able to pivot that anger into sadness, it creates space for reconciliation. We see how in the story of this father who was addicted to drugs and not present to his family, his wife had every reason to be angry, but she was also sad that her children were not able to grow up with their father present. And so, she decided to never speak ill of him and to turn that anger into sadness, to lament the loss of their father so that the children would be open to reconciliation when the time was right.

Likewise, we see how when Catholics and Lutherans and other Protestant denominations look at our past disagreements and our bitter fights not from the perspective of anger, but from the perspective of sadness, then we create that space to explore how can we heal this sadness, how can we heal these divisions, and how can we celebrate what it is that we share together. It doesn't need to be 100 % perfect, but still there are those opportunities for celebration.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, we see how the loving and merciful father is ready to welcome his son back. He is carried not by a sense of anger, but by this sense of loss of sadness, and he's ready to allow God's joy to enter his life when his son returns. I invite us all to create space for sadness in our life so that when the time is right, reconciliation can break forth. And then, we can celebrate re-establish relationships and friendships and connections that may have been broken and so that we can truly share God's joy with each other.