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Good morning. Am I on? It's an honor to be back with you. We were here in 2009 to talk about The Jesus Creed. This is the first invitation we've had to talk a little bit about Kingdom Conspiracy. I sure hope you buy the book, whether you read it or not.

I want to talk about a pretty serious topic with you this morning that concerns the conspiracy of the kingdom in this world that Jesus unleashed in the first century, a kingdom of grace and mercy and forgiveness and reconciliation. I want to speak into the situation where each of us has a habit, perhaps you would call it a knack, but it's a reality that most of us live in unreconciled relationships. I think I can say that all of us live in unreconciled relationships. Just last night, two men talked to me from Aldersgate who were seeking reconciliation with their fathers. I know of a Christian college where in the Bible and Theology Department there are two professors who haven't talked to one another in seven years, six years. One of them teaches Christian ethics. One of the topics in Christian ethics, unless things have changed, is forgiveness, reconciliation.

Husbands and wives have dimensions of their relationship that are unreconciled, and they call themselves Christians. Parents are unreconciled with their children or children despise their parents, and they call themselves Christians. Siblings are unreconciled with one another sometimes for decades and call themselves Christians. There are neighbors who will not talk to one another; they haven't talked to one another for years and call themselves Christians. In our places of employment we have people we don't want to see; we hope they're not in the hallway. They hope we're not in the hallway. We live in unreconciled relationships. Even Christians in churches don't get along. Have you ever heard of that? That's why we have so many denominations in the world is because they are in unreconciled relationships.

We will soon utter together The Lord's Prayer as the model prayer Jesus gave to his followers. There are haunting words in that prayer for people in unreconciled relationships, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive the trespasses of others, others who have trespassed against us." Jesus suggests in this prayer ... I should strengthen that. He's not just suggesting; he's saying that our forgiveness with God is connected to our willingness to forgive others. Just in case you think that's a little troublesome theologically, Jesus told the parable that we looked at and was read in scripture this morning. In that parable, Jesus says at the end, "This is how my heavenly father will treat you, each of you, unless you forgive your brother or your sister from the heart."



Forgiveness is the very makeup of kingdom people, of church people in this world. I'd like to look at this word will, will forgive, because Jesus is here saying in the end, ultimately, in the kingdom, in heaven, beyond death, "Your relationship with me will be connected to how you have forgiven other people." Yes, Jesus tells a comic parable, and he's good at this, and if you listen to it, you begin to laugh. How foolish, how dopy of this guy to be forgiven what is an equivalent of about a hundred and ten thousand years of labor, and then to turn around and not be willing to forgive someone of just a few months of labor. Jesus enters us into this story so that we will hear it and for awhile we laugh and we poke our finger at the guy and we say to ourselves, I would never do that. Then by the time the parable is done, we wonder if he's not talking to us and maybe with a little Mona Lisa smile on his face, saying this one's for you.

It is for each of us. Each of us needs to be reminded that we are called not to live in unreconciled relationships. The greatest compliment that can be uttered about Aldersgate United Methodist Church is that these people get along well with one another. An even stronger version of that is to say I've heard they even forgive one another at that church. Those are the words that Jesus wants us to hear today. What we see in this parable, then, is Jesus pushing us to see ultimate significance in forgiveness and reconciliation in this world. He calls us to forgive because heaven will be a world of forgiveness.

I'm quite aware after a couple of years of study about heaven that comfortable people, mostly white people, in our world don't think about heaven and some of them don't care about heaven. Why go to heaven when you've got everything now? But the oppressed people of this world ache for heaven because, like Jesus, they know this world has not made things right and they want the world to be right. Heaven will be on our mind this morning as we think about forgiveness, because we can't understand forgiveness today until we understand what heaven will be like.

When I was a little boy, a young, maybe I was ten or eleven, I asked my mother one day if there would be golf in heaven. My mother, ever trying to be the theologian- And now that I'm a theologian, I've learned that she's not really a theologian but she's still my mother. My mother said, "If it will make you happy, it will be there." This was a wonderful formula for me to memorize for my theology of heaven.

One day, our pastor took up golf, and then after he had been playing golf I think a couple of years, he said one day in a sermon that it took a lot of time to play golf. I remember thinking to myself that's the way time is designed to be spent. But not for him. He said he wasn't sure there would be time in heaven for golf



because we would be absorbed with God. I leaned over to my mother and I said, "I know there will be time in heaven for golf." She said, "Why?" I said, "Because it will make me happy." I used her theology to deconstruct her question. Then she said, "I think you need to listen to your pastor a little bit more."

In the history of heaven, which shapes how we live now for Christians, there have been two major ideas. One is what we call a theocentric view of heaven, and that is where God is at the center, where heaven is about union with God, communion with God and worship. In fact, in one of the songs we just sang, it came very close to this theocentric understanding of heaven in talking about Jesus being our all in all and we will worship him forever, which is true. Some people see heaven exclusively in those terms and they create a view of the Christian life that is exclusively about a personal relationship with God, and when they get to heaven they believe that they will not even recognize other people, so absorbed will they be with God.

I have to tell you, in my cynical moments, I wonder if Sunday morning pastors and worship leaders haven't designed this theory of heaven, that heaven will be an eternal eleven o'clock Sunday morning service. I know when I was a little boy, that was not very appealing to me. I thought, wow, forever? One hour was forever for me.

There's been another idea about heaven, and this is the one that I want to share with you this morning and talk about, and that is a kingdom-centric view of heaven. If you look at the pages of the bible, the vision, the utopian visions and the visions of heaven is that it will be a kingdom. The kingdom that is described is a flourishing society of justice and peace and food in abundance, especially desirable for those who have not had food in this world, and drink in abundance, that it is a flourishing society of justice and love and forgiveness and reconciliation. Heaven will only be heaven if all things are made right, if all sins are ended and all justice is established for all people for all time. That's what heaven would be like. It would not be heaven if all things were not made right.

Let me suggest to you what I think the first hour in heaven will be like. I don't really know this, but I know I'm right. I don't know it because I don't know how it will happen. It could be at the moment of death or it could be the moment when we encounter God. It could be the moment when we encounter others in the presence of God. But this will happen, all things will be made right. Part of all things being made right is truth will be told and reconciliation will occur. First, we will go face-to-face with God. We will know ourselves as we really are, and we will know God for how he is. The truth will be so clear to us that we will want to confess our sins. We will want to turn from our sins and we will want to



embrace God's grace and forgiveness and reconciliation. We will also go face-to-face with others, because that's part of heaven when all things are made right.

I like to vision the first hour in heaven as a massive complex of coffee tables where people are sitting across from one another, going face-to-face over their favorite beverage. I'll leave it to you to fill in what that beverage is, but if Jesus turned water into wine, you might not have to be so Wesleyan at that moment. We will go one-to-one with others. We will know others as they are; they will know us for who we are; and all reconciliation will occur. All at once in the first hour of heaven, all things will be made right. Forgiveness and reconciliation will be the first themes and songs on the first hour of heaven. I sometimes like to think that the introverts will surround all those tables because they didn't create all these problems in this world, but an introvert said to me one time when I said this, "Yes, but we have really bad attitudes toward others, so we'll have to join you at the table."

Truth and repentance and forgiveness and reconciliation. You see what I mean that the vision of heaven, if it's just with God, it's kind of easy in this world? But if it is a kingdom view of heaven, all of a sudden we realize we're going to be right with God and right with others and the world will work the way God wants it to work. Surely, sometimes the unfathomable grace of God will cover detestable and unfathomably painful sins.

I recently read about this in a book by Leslie Leyland Fields called *Forgiving Our Fathers and Mothers*. *Forgiving Our Fathers and Mothers*. She tells the story of her own dysfunctional family, but she clearly doesn't want to throw her mother or her father under the bus. She wants reconciliation with her father and her mother. Because it's complex, I want to read some things I've written about this.

Once praying and meditating over The Lord's Prayer, Leslie mused, "Does honor your father apply to our family," she questioned, "those of us who have been hurt and deceived and abandoned by our mothers or fathers or even both?" Leslie continued, "Neither did I care to forgive my father and all that had been done in the rooms and houses of my childhood, where he sometimes sat and walked and walked away from." She puts her pain into another question. "What could be more unnatural, more upside down than this, the ones who bring us into the world abandoning us to the world?" Leslie and her siblings, neglected and deprived in America, stole food and clothing to cover their shame. They kept a tight guard around their home lest their friends discover what really occurred inside those walls. They sunk into a life of shame, which they considered normal.



When Leslie wrote her first book, she sent it to her father, and her father never responded or acknowledged that she had written a book. What we are talking about in the first hour of heaven is a father who probably had a schizoid personality disorder and whom Leslie once described in these terms. "That sad, pathetic lump of a man whose only achievement was siring six human beings, one of whom he molested, all of whom he seemed to disavow." Will such reconciliation occur beyond the grave in the first hour of heaven?

What we are talking about is Laurie, Leslie's sister, who once informed Leslie in these words. "Dad used to come into my room." Leslie asked back, "What? What do you mean? How often?" Laurie then said, "Whenever he could for many years. That's why I would run away at night." Leslie's question haunts, but not as much her sister's response. Leslie said, "Laurie, why didn't you tell me?" And Laurie says back, "What could you have done? There was nothing you could have done. Dad ruined my life, you know." Leslie and Laurie did their best to forgive and reconcile their father in this life.

Let us suppose the unfathomable, that on the far side of death, at the gate of heaven, at one of the tables is their father and we see Leslie and Laurie at the table confronting their father with the sins of their family. That's the moment truth will fall from heaven in lightning strikes of truth and the thunders of grace and embrace and repentance and confession and forgiveness and reconciliation. Heaven can't begin until that occurs. But when it occurs, we will then hear the drumsticks tapping on the casings of the drum to create the rhythms of grace and reconciliation in heaven. Then we will hear the brass and the percussions and the strings, and there will be an explosion of praise and reconciliation in the presence of God as grace and forgiveness and reconciliation flow in the first hour of heaven.

I cannot imagine heaven now without thinking of Leslie and Laurie in the front row of the choir singing praise to God for his renewed grace and new creation. Every sin we have ever committed, every evil system that we have participated in, and every moment when we have rebelled against God will be made right. For that to occur, truth must be told and truth must be embraced in the embrace of forgiveness and reconciliation.

I see this as glorious. I feel like it's glorious enough that we have entered for a moment into Narnia with the Pevensie children. The Pevensie children eventually come back and feel the twigs against their face and then they're in the wardrobe and then they're on the floor in the house. That's what happens to us as we see the first hour of heaven and we see what heaven will be like. We suddenly come back to reality and we say, but what about us now? What do we



do now? What we do now is we begin to make things right in the here and now as we prepare ourselves as kingdom people in the here and now for the kingdom in the future. What can we do? We can make things right.

I tell a like story. When I was a sophomore in high school, I had a hippie teacher. This was when hippies really were hippies. We knew he was a hippie because our English classroom was in a circle rather than in rows. It was so radical. We felt so revolutionary. We wore blue jeans and tee-shirts to school. It was a radical hippie teacher that we had teaching us English, and we knew he was even more hippie-ish because he was living with one of the students in our class. No one knew what to do about that sort of thing.

Mr. Hippie assigned two novels that year, that as a sophomore we had to read two novels and write book reviews or book reports about them. I was in love with a young girl who is now my wife and I was on sports teams, and I didn't have time to read too many novels. But I went to the library and I picked two books off that looked alike by a Mr. Willa Cather. I didn't know at the time that Willa Cather was a woman, but that's all right. That's part of the story.

I picked off these two novels; I took them home and sat them on my desk. Suddenly it dawned on me that my reviews were due the next day, so I sat down at my desk with my manual typewriter without ever having opened up any books written by Mr. Willa Cather and I invented two book reviews. About a week later, I got a B+ on each book review, and I had called him Mr. Willa Cather in the book and Mr. Hippie had evidently not read Willa Cather to even know that it was a female author.

Two years later, I got right with God. I felt guilty about what I had done in my book reviews, so I wrote a long letter to Mr. Hippie. I told him what I had done, that I was wrong. I confessed my sin and I asked him to forgive me, and I hoped to high heaven that he wouldn't make me take that class again. I was a senior, and I didn't want to be taking sophomore English.

My father was a high school teacher, too, and Mr. Hippie told my father about the letter that I had written to him. My father saw me in the hallway and he told me how proud he was of me that I had done such a thing, and he said that Mr. Hippie was also quite proud of me. Later in the day I saw Mr. Hippie and he called me to the side and we talked awhile and he told me how proud he was. He had never seen a student do any such thing in all his years of teaching, all three years of his teaching. Then he asked me- He says, "All I'm going to ask you to do," he says, "you've confessed your sin, it's fine." He said, "I'm going to ask you that some time in your life, you read the two novels by Mr. Willa Cather."



I'm happy to announce to you today that I have now read O Pioneer! and I'm halfway through My Antonia, Antonia if you know the real thing. It is a woman author named Willa Cather, and she's really fun to read. I could have finished that book today on the airplane, but now we have to drive back home, so I have another excuse of not having read the book.

I'm glad I made it right. This is just an illustration of what you and I are called to do now because of the first hour in heaven, when all things will be made right. We want to be ready for that day. We don't want to have four thousand tables lined up with people waiting to make it right with us. We want to make it right now. I want you to think about who you have to make it right with and what you need to do, and I'm going to make a suggestion. I call it the soft shoe dance approach to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Sometimes we get all enthusiastic about reconciliation and forgiveness, and we think the other person should just forgive us because we've confessed our sin. Or we go to them and we want them to be reconciled with us because of what they've done. But that's not the way the dance of forgiveness and reconciliation works. I call it the soft shoe dance, and it works like this. You take the first step either to confess your sin or to ask for reconciliation, but you don't get to take the second step until the other person has taken their first step, because if in dancing you take one step forward and the other person doesn't move and you take a second step, you step on their feet and it becomes coercive and forceful. We are called to offer forgiveness in grace, and we take the first step because we're kingdom people in a kingdom conspiracy of grace in this world where we are living out a new kind of world in this world today.

We have to be careful and distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation. Reconciliation is a process of two people, but we can release the other person from what they've done and we can disconnect ourselves from the deed or the perpetrator that has been done so that we can live a life of emotional and spiritual health. We have to distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation, which brings people together. Sometimes we can't reconcile. Sometimes it's dangerous to be reconciled with someone, but we can forgive that person. Sometimes we can't reconcile because a person is deceased, but we can always forgive, and that's the first step in the dance of reconciliation. In the first hour of heaven, all sins will be forgiven because all sins will be known for what they are. We will embrace the reality and be reconciled with one another.

I would urge you today to think about the person you need to be right with and to take the first step in the dance of reconciliation and begin the kingdom conspiracy in Alexandria, Virginia.



Thank you.