

Spiritual soccer: Not everything is fixable

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [January 29, 2008](#) issue

"I have resigned myself to the fact that there are some people in this life with whom I will never be reconciled." I was 22 and a second-year seminarian when an older friend said this to me, and I was shocked. How could a faithful man, one who had taught me a great deal about Christian faith and life, be willing to give up hope? Didn't Paul tell us that in Christ we have been given "the ministry of reconciliation" and that we are called to be "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:16ff)? My friend's comment became a sign to me of the dangers of accommodation.

Then, a few weeks ago, I was talking to a younger friend who was pushing for reconciliation in a relationship that seemed remarkably resistant to it. "Look," I said, "sometimes reconciliation just isn't possible in the near term, except for a miracle of God's grace. In such circumstances and relationships, we can only pray, love the other as an enemy who is still a child of God, and try not to do things that will make it more difficult to keep the space open for reconciliation in the future. But there are limits to reconciliation in this life."

My younger friend was surprised that I had become so cynical. What about 2 Corinthians? What about my own writing on "embodying forgiveness" as a way of life?

His questions have stayed with me. Was I in the same exchange two decades later, this time playing the accommodated older friend to a younger person still aflame with a commitment to the gospel?

Perhaps. In some respects I have probably settled in, accepting some things I ought not to, failing to question some things I should. Furthermore, I know that we ought to be open to criticism from others about whether what we call growing in wisdom is actually a lowering of our sights and the loss of passion for the gospel's transformative power.

But at this point in my life I also appreciate the wisdom in my older friend's comment. Most obviously, I have learned that reconciliation requires two or more people to be fully responsive, and I am not in control of others' responses—even if all of the parties profess to be committed to the ministry of reconciliation.

Further, I have become much more aware of the legacies of sin, the complexities of relationships and the tangled webs of personal and social histories. I am much less optimistic. The world is less tractable than I previously thought. Not everything is fixable. The psalms are filled with wisdom about this, as is the rest of scripture.

Over time, I have learned to remain open to God's grace as a check against cynicism. The miracles of the fall of the Berlin Wall and South Africa's peaceful transition to democracy after apartheid have taught me not to underestimate the prospects for miracles from God—in large social systems as well as in personal relationships. I wish that my older friend, years ago, had acknowledged this possibility.

Reconciliation is less something we achieve than it is space we help create that allows God's grace to move. Our task is to tend the soil in which reconciliation can blossom—in God's time rather than ours.

It seems significant that in James 5:12ff—a passage that describes Christian community in terms of practices such as truth telling, singing, praying, anointing, healing and confessing—forgiveness is described as something to be discovered rather than willed. The practices are important in preparing the soil, but they cannot achieve or force forgiveness and reconciliation, which come as a gift.

Living the ministry of reconciliation is less like American football and more like soccer. In *The Moral Imagination*, John Paul Lederach writes: "In soccer, the field is wide. The motion is constant. In order to create a goal, the ball moves back, across, forward, and back again. Multiple sets of players coordinate and create a complex pattern of relationships and relational spaces from which openings are derived for pursuing the goal, more often than not in totally unexpected ways that require imagination and skill. Unlike American football, progress is not measured by each play and whether forward movement was created."

Soccer creates space, and reconciliation involves a willingness to pass backward, to be patient and to develop new relationships with other players in order to move toward the goal. There are even times where it is not constant motion but a sense of

passing the ball gently while resetting the team's focus and spacing.

As we reach toward the goal of 2 Corinthians, we need both: the passion and talent of gifted rookies as well as the wisdom of seasoned veterans. We need to focus on the game we are in, and determine how best we can participate.