

Joshua 5:9-12  
II Corinthians 5:16-21  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Rugby was not really of much interest to Nelson Mandela. It was played by the white elite in his native South Africa, a country that burned with hatred because of apartheid. For almost 45 years after World War Two, the white minority ruled with authoritarian power, denying black people any voice or choice even in matters concerning them. There were separate schools for blacks and whites; separate beaches; separate marriages. It was against the law to marry a person of a different color or ethnic heritage.

Apartheid wasn't abolished until the 1990s and Nelson Mandela became the first president of the newly democratic South Africa. Immediately he began putting aside old prejudices and urged citizens to let bygones be bygones. He knew that to avoid vengeful civil war, reconciliation had to prevail. It was time for South Africans to come out of their trenches – their separate trenches. Rugby would be the unlikely path to reconciliation.

Rugby: almost a religion of the former ruling class. The national team – the all-white Springboks – were detested by the black majority who would root for any team opposing them. You know the saying: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." The Springbok jersey was especially hated. It was the very symbol of privilege and separateness. But Nelson Mandela put it on anyway – as well as the team cap – in order to shake hands publicly with both teams before kick-off. As he was led onto the field, the hubbub of noise stopped. A stunned silence settled on the stadium. Then a smattering of applause, which grew and grew. Mandela had made the first gesture of reconciliation. And people took notice. Around the world.

And it probably helped that South Africa won that game: the 1995 Rugby World Cup.<sup>1</sup>

Reconciliation is more than a cease-fire. It is more than just agreeing not to bicker. Reconciliation restores. It heals what was broken. Where there has been separation, it brings back together and into harmony. Whether its parent to child; friend to friend; or citizen to citizen. Where the life of Spirit is concerned, we may not even realize we are estranged from God. Or we don't see the extent of our estrangement. Maybe we just don't feel that God matters that much. That's how broken or disconnected much of human life is.

Today's second reading says over and over again that God takes the initiative to be reconciled to us even though God isn't the one who has gone astray. God isn't estranged from us. We are estranged from God. We are the Prodigal Son.

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<sup>1</sup>"Nelson Mandela seized the opportunity of the Rugby World Cup 1995" by Mick Cleary, Rugby Union Correspondent, Dec. 6, 2013.  
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/nelson-mandela/10140763/Nelson-Mandela-seized-the-opportunity-of-the-Rugby-World-Cup-1995.html>

The story of the Prodigal is a story of reconciliation. The father in the story does the magnificent work of reconciling even though he's the one who has been most significantly wronged.

And the reconciliation is breathtaking. It cost him something. He had suffered protracted anguish believing his younger son was dead. When the kid reappeared, his father ran to him, something a dignified Arabic chieftain never did. To run meant hiking up one's long robes so as to reveal naked flesh! The father paid for this reconciliation by, first of all, putting aside his justifiable anger at his son; and second, by a certain loss of dignity.

And the work of reconciliation isn't done. The older son has exiled himself to a cold abyss of jealousy and pouting. Again, Dad leaves aside scolding and re-welcomes this older boy. He says, "You are always here with me. All I have is yours. I love you now and I have always loved you."

The father has worked to be reconciled to both his sons. One more piece of reconciliation remains: that of brother to brother. Says the parent to his older boy: "This brother of yours was dead and has come to life." Come, let us rejoice and be glad.

Reconciliation leads to rejoicing and gladness. But it usually costs something. Like putting on the jersey of the hated rugby elites. Like hiking up one's skirts and running half naked to embrace. Whatever it costs us to be agents of reconciliation doesn't compare with what it cost Jesus. The ministry of reconciliation isn't meant to be optional. It is meant to be a natural result of following Jesus; of being in harmony with him and in love with God.

Amen.