A biblical text I draw on for repairing small harms

Brief essays by church leaders

The contributors for this collection of brief essays received this prompt:

> What is a biblical text that comes to mind when you think of repairing harm, especially small harm? After summarizing or quoting the text, offer a brief commentary on why it matters to you and perhaps how it's helped you deal with the small hurts you've experienced or caused in family, neighborhood, town, or congregational life.

Annika Krause
Pastor, Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal, Montreal, QC

Romans 12:1–18: Loving one another with mutual affection.

When I first started as a pastor, I felt a lot of anxiety about making mistakes. After all, what do you do when you accidentally trigger someone you are trying to comfort? At such times, it is essential to make space for everyone to express their feelings, to "renew our minds" (Rom 12:2) and not start from a place of arrogance or defensiveness. This passage reminds me of how much of a difference my mindset makes when I deal with conflict. We must speak with grace and understanding in order to live in harmony with one another, as God calls us to do. Casting a light on conflict and naming it encourages us to "live peaceably with all" (Rom 12:18).

Not too long ago, an older man in the congregation was traveling abroad alone. His credit card stopped working, so he emailed me and others a request to pay on his behalf. It looked like a scam! We asked him to call us. We didn't get responses, but new email requests kept coming in.

The next day, someone helped him make a call. He and I had a long conversation. I started by acknowledging how frustrating the experience must have been for him. He was understandably flustered. To him, it seemed we were not helping him when he needed it most. He had space to express his feelings, and then I had a chance to explain our perspective. In the end, we each felt heard and responded graciously to one another in genuine love. Thanks be to God!

Alaina Dobkowski
Pastor, Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship, Grand Rapids, MI

> *"By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit."*
>
> *Galatians 5:22–23, NRSVue*

As we walked around Reeds Lake one sunny afternoon six years ago, Susan and I were deep in discussion about the Holy Spirit's guidance of the house church we were co-leading. She pointed us to Galatians 5.

"How will we know if we are following the Spirit?" she asked aloud, before pausing. "We'll know by the fruit."

Since that day, this passage has not only guided our leadership but has also guided me through challenging moments, big and small.

As a parent of small children, my patience can wear thin. My children's disregard for my feelings can really agitate me. When frustrated (on my best days), I ask myself, before reacting, "What will the fruit of this moment be?" Responding in frustration typically yields fruit I'm not proud of, while a thoughtful conversation, once emotions have settled, guides us toward the fruit of the Spirit.

As a pastor and organizer, I've learned that even in the best congregation and community work, we are always disappointing one another: a missed email goes unanswered, a task is dropped, a misunderstanding occurs, or a project does not move forward quickly enough. When I'm called out on a harm I've committed or when I'm on the receiving end, I am reminded of the Spirit's guidance. I take a deep breath. I ask, what will the fruit of this moment be?

I give thanks to the Holy Spirit and her presence, guidance, and wisdom. How will we know if we are following her as we navigate relationships and the cycles of harm and repair?

We'll know by the fruit.

Al Rempel
Associate Executive Minister, Mennonite Church Canada, St. Catharines, ON

Luke 10:38–42

In this text, Martha is busy preparing for Jesus while Mary sits and listens. When Martha asks for help, Jesus gently reminds her that while many things matter, Mary has chosen what is most important.

I've often felt for Martha. The practical work she does is necessary, yet it seems to be overlooked. In many ways, her experience reflects the reality of congregational leadership. Leaders attend to many details and, along the way, make decisions for the good of the whole—sometimes setting boundaries or choosing paths that not everyone will agree with. Living in that tension is not easy.

The small harms leaders experience often arise from their own inner voice. Those asked to make decisions rarely do so lightly or without deep care. Each choice brings its own measure of self-questioning and doubt. Even when decisions prove imperfect—as all human decisions will—it is seldom out of indifference. More often, leaders are faithfully navigating the tension between care for individuals and responsibility for the whole. Many would much rather sit at Jesus's feet, letting someone else look after the details.

Perhaps this story invites us to see both sisters more fully. Mary's attentiveness matters—but so does Martha's faithful work. In that light, faithful leaders might also learn to meet themselves with a bit more gentleness.

To all congregational leaders: thank you. Your care, your courage, and your willingness to serve in complex spaces are deeply valued.

Brenda Sawatsky Paetkau
Pastor, Eighth Street Mennonite Church, Goshen, IN

Philippians 2:6–11

When I am troubled, I turn to the Christ hymn in Philippians 2. I read the entire hymn, but I especially meditate on this phrase from verse 7: Jesus "emptied himself."

I used to think Jesus accomplished some form of being actually "empty." Now I think that whatever arose in Jesus, as it constantly did, he kept handing it over to God. I'm trying to simply trust that whatever I am holding—emotions, thoughts, revenge, pity, et cetera—my task is to tell the truth about those things and hand them into God's enormous heart, hopefully *before* taking any action. If I only remember to meditate *after* I've taken action, this verse might prompt me to seek further repair, whether it's something I still need to ask for from another or something I still need to offer them.

This practice requires trusting God's *aliveness* to the extent that everything can be handed over. Those things are not gone from me, but they are no longer carried singularly by me. I have chosen to seek a greater wisdom in the handing over, in the constant "emptying" of all that appears.

Joel Beachy
Pastor, East Union Mennonite Church, Kalona, IA

> *"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."*
>
> *James 1:19–20, NIV*

"Death by a thousand cuts" is a gruesome image of attrition. It has us imagine the slow deterioration of something that was once whole and strong. Relationships sometimes die a slow death when careless words, misguided assumptions, and impatience are introduced. Our words have power, and we sometimes use them mindlessly. The result can be harm that tears apart relationships that took years to form.

We are often challenged in our relationships to build and maintain trust. Doing this well requires not only transparency in our communication but also listening well, avoiding assumptions about others' motives, choosing words carefully, maintaining confidence, asking clarifying questions, and addressing conflict directly.

The author of the book of James recommends that we take care when we communicate with one another, doing so in ways that are life-giving and that reflect God's goodness. And the reality is that even thoughtful communication will fail us from time to time. Jesus suggests that we are to be ready for this eventuality. When we hurt one another, even unintentionally, we must reconcile with one another: make things right with each other. Jesus describes how a faithful person goes to the altar of God to offer a gift, but then remembers that they have a conflict with a sibling in Christ. Jesus says we must first go and be reconciled with the other. Then we will be ready to offer our gifts to God. Right relationships with others are integral to our right relationship with God.

Marilyn Rudy-Froese
Leadership Minister, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, Kitchener, ON

> *"Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'"*
>
> *Mark 12:29–31, NRSVue*

This text that I carry with me has its roots in the Old Testament and is quoted by Jesus when a scribe asks him about the greatest commandment. It helps me to see others as God's beloved and to remember that I am also God's beloved. As I breathe in God's love for me, I can breathe out God's love for the person who is annoying me, knowing that it sometimes takes everything I have—my whole being—to let go of anger, resentment, or hurt, and live into forgiveness and love. This text helps me choose grace when I don't feel gracious toward the person who has cut me off in traffic or who has sent me a harsh email. It also helps me choose grace for myself when I know my actions or words have inadvertently harmed someone else. Loving God and neighbor as I love myself reminds me that we are all loved by the one God, whose love helps me extend love to others and myself, however imperfectly.

Matthew Bailey-Dick
Pastor, Wellesley Mennonite Church, Wellesley, ON

> *"Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet. Righteousness and peace will kiss each other."*
>
> *Psalm 85:10, NRSV*

I've always been a strong believer in "chemistry": the dynamic emerging from my interaction with Person #1 being different than the dynamic with Person #2. This is why I feel both encouraged and niggled by the words of Psalm 85:10.

Some years ago, John Paul Lederach caught my attention by showing how the Psalmist's "place of encounter" or "kiss" between love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace could generate new possibilities in the world of conflict transformation. The verse could almost serve as the preface to a peacebuilding manifesto!

More personally, when my spouse and I work through conflict, we often use relationship-building tools from counselors such as Julie Schwartz Gottman and John Gottman, who advise couples to "turn toward each other" and to follow specific steps for repair after experiences of hurt or disharmony. When I choose defensiveness as part of the chemistry between the two of us, I am not arriving at the "place of encounter" in a helpful way. When I choose a posture of listening or curiosity, I begin to contribute toward repair. Psalm 85:10 offers me spiritual encouragement as I use the tried-and-true Gottman resources.

The niggling comes when I reflect on how chemistry always changes, even with the same person! What will the place of encounter look like this time? What will I give to the chemistry today? "The Lord will give what is good" (Ps 85:12).

Melissa Atchison
Pastor, Manhattan Mennonite Church, Manhattan, KS

> *"Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Don't be troubled or afraid."*
>
> *John 14:27, CEB*

How the world creates a facsimile of peace in my day-to-day context often sounds like, "You be you. I'll be me." This kind of peace implies that there's no point in working through the conflict.

In contrast, Jesus has given us his peace, a holistic *shalom* peace that challenges us to work through small harms in relationships instead of walking away. As someone who has learned about this better way toward peace in the second half of my life, I'm still a beginner and often feel afraid when I recognize the need to move toward reconciliation. That's when I remember that Jesus has given (and is actively giving, in real time!) his peace. This otherworldly true peace is a gift I can accept over and over. I use the courage that comes with it to go to the one with whom I have experienced harm. Fear not!

Micheline Ayitoma Ilonga
Congolese judge and peacebuilder, Indianapolis, IN, accompanying her husband who serves as pastor at First Mennonite Church, and assisting as their mother her two children who are in college

> *"Our Father who is in heaven, bring in your Kingdom, so that your will is done on earth as it's done in heaven. . . . don't lead me to temptation, but rescue me from the evil one."*
>
> *Matthew 6:9–10, 13, CEB*

Disagreement and conflict are normal and part of life. God is love, and he values relationships and is the perfecter of our faith and our healer. His reign over everything that concerns us always leads to a harmonious life and makes things right.

Recently, when faced with life's challenges or everyday negative impacts (the kind of hurt that may happen at home, at work, in church, or in the community), the prayer that the Lord Jesus Christ taught his disciples has been my reference point and foundation. It transforms and changes my thoughts as well as my walk with God and my interactions with the community, fostering a healthy relationship.

The Kingdom of God is peace, joy, patience, forgiveness: life as it is supposed to be. It is a reality in our lives when we believe and obey the words and deeds of Jesus Christ as his disciples. It is not just a future reality but also a present-day one. Jesus Christ announced and confirmed this when addressing the Pharisees on the subject, saying, "God's Kingdom is already among you" (Luke 17:20).

Thinking of God's cosmic plan for humanity and Jesus Christ's ultimate sacrifice on the cross, in any circumstance I may face, I pray that by the power of the Holy Spirit God reigns and takes the lead, taking control of the situation for peace to prevail. When he reigns, he delivers me and keeps me away from difficult situations that would undermine my faith. This attitude helps me grow in humility and forgiveness, and restrains me from seeking revenge.

Pratik Bagh
Pastor, Hively Avenue Mennonite Church, Elkhart, IN

> *"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."*
>
> *1 Peter 4:8, NIV*

First Peter instructs a diverse and nurturing community of witnesses of Christ to practice the art of covering sins as an aspect of love. These "sins" are the careless mistakes one makes in everyday life without realizing the harm they can cause others. Such harms might not require a formal apology, even though they are undoubtedly hurtful. Forgiving slight neglect, tiny lies, casually made promises, or even bad jokes can seem difficult, especially when the demand is to forgive all the time as Christians. To avoid overthinking, bitterness, or frustration, I find the idea of *covering over* very useful.

Sometimes good cooks confess to the guests that their food didn't turn out the way they wanted! Something unknowingly went wrong during the cooking process, so their food doesn't taste as good as they expected or wanted. For their part, guests can help out by adding a pinch of salt or using pickle or sauce to make the food taste better. Like good cooks, most loving people fail too! They, too, need others to show them grace and to Καλύπτει (cover over), which helps avoid responses like revenge or complaint and helps maintain healthy interpersonal relationships.

I understand Peter's phrase "multitude of sins" as multiple people experiencing a multitude of sins multiple times throughout their lives. So they must master the art of covering: recognizing the fault and covering over, knowing that the next day they might need their own sin covered. When our love for people includes occasionally covering their careless mistakes, we form a community that understands that we don't need to be perfect to be loved.

Richard Gehring
Pastor, Lombard Mennonite Church, Lombard, IL

> *"If anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise."*
>
> *Philippians 4:8, CEB*

Some years ago, I experienced a crisis of hope. In the face of personal disappointments and national trends, I found myself becoming increasingly cynical.

After prayerful discernment, I committed myself to a "Year of Hope." For a full year, I reflected daily on a Bible passage and an inspirational quotation from someone whose life bore witness to its truth. I sought to resist the tendency toward cynicism that threatened to lead me astray on my journey toward justice, love, and peace.

My theme verse for that year was Paul's encouragement to believers to set their minds on whatever is true, holy, just, pure, lovely, and worthy of praise. These words can sometimes be misused to encourage a Pollyanna-like denial of injustice, suffering, and violence. But as he writes from prison in Rome, I hear Paul calling us to see reality truthfully—not only the brokenness around us, but also the steadfast presence and faithfulness of God.

I continue to return to these words as I seek to remain focused on the hope and promise of God's Reign, not allowing the small harms I encounter along the way to distract me from the larger story of God's redeeming work in the world.

Ruth Boehm
Pastor, Faith Mennonite Church, Leamington, ON

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
For you shall go out in joy
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

Isaiah 55:8–13, NRSV

The day after our honeymoon, I realized I had a choice to make. The way my husband put the pots and pans away was not the way that I did. Our wedding scripture was fresh in my mind. *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord."* We chose this text because we don't look at things the same way. We usually start on opposite sides. We even put pots and pans away differently.

So I had to choose. Would I be irritated every time I put away a frying pan? Or would I remember that "your ways are not my ways" and let it go? I decided that a lifetime was a long time to be irritated about a small thing. So I took the non-essentials out of the cupboard and, for over thirty years, have not worried about where the cookware is placed.

This scripture verse has been so useful to us in our relationship, at work, and in parenting. When we step back and say, "Your ways are not my ways," it helps us gain perspective.

The best part about this text is verse 12. God promises that we shall go out in joy and be led back in peace. The joy we experience when we can let people be who they are and enjoy them for who they are is amazing. When we resolve conflict or put differences into perspective, we experience great peace and joy.