

30-45 MINUTE EXERCISE - Mending

This practice is designed to give children a more in-depth time of mending and reconciliation. Whilst it does not necessarily have to happen in church, much of the Christian iconography which would typically be found in a church can be instructive and helpful in thinking about mending relationships. It does allow for a more distinctively Christian exploration of spirituality, but it should equally allow just as much room for engagement by those of different faiths or none.

The general format of the session will be an introduction, followed by a choice of prayer stations for the children to use. These stations might work better with Key Stage 2 children, but this does not exclude the possibility of doing it with younger children as well.

The room/church should be set up with either the cross or the poster of Rembrandt's Return of the Prodigal as the focus. If the poster is the focus, then the cross may be laid on the floor in front of it, or in a more central position in the space. If the cross is the focus, then it is good to drape it with a red organza cloth for aesthetic and spiritual reasons. The red represents the blood of Jesus and the pain that comes when relationships are broken. It is good as well, if appropriate, to have a lit candle near the base of the cross. The other stations can be spread out around the space to allow for free movement.

It is also good to have some music on in the background which is conducive both to contemplation but also to creative mending. The Allegri *Miserere* used in Noticing can be good for this, as can tracks from the Taizé community in France. These can all be easily found on YouTube.

INTRODUCTION

All children are to be seated in a big circle for the introduction if possible. Introduce the task by saying:

A central part of what it means to flourish and live deeply as a human being is being in good relationships with others. It might be with one particular special friend or friends, or it might be with a bigger group, it might be with one member of your family, or a larger family group.

Sometimes good relationships are easy. I wonder if you remember a time, recently or a while ago, when a friend/s, classmates or family and you were all playing happily together. Close your eyes and call that to mind now. How did you feel? How do you think others felt and why?

PAUSE

Sometimes good relationships are not easy. I wonder if you remember a time, recently or a while ago, when relationships between you and a friend/s, classmates or family were not so good. Close your eyes and call that to mind now. How did you feel? How do you think others felt and why?

PAUSE

What, if anything, made the situation better?

PAUSE

People of faith also want to be in good relationship with God but are conscious that they sometimes do or say things which not only hurt themselves and others, but would also hurt a God who loves them and the world. It can be important to make time to mend relationships with God as well as with other human beings. I wonder what sort of things that we do might make a God of love sad.

PAUSE

Rembrandt's Painting

The picture on the poster is a famous painting by the Dutch artist Rembrandt called *The Return of the Prodigal Son* and it now hangs in The Hermitage in St Petersburg. It is based on the famous parable which Jesus told with the same name, The Prodigal Son, also sometimes known as the Lost Son. (It has also been the subject of a famous book by the much-respected author Henri Nouwen, who analyses and comments in depth on various aspects and characters in the painting). If you don't know this story that Jesus told in Luke Chapter 15 then it would be good to read it now before doing the long mending practice, and so that the poster of this famous painting makes sense. It is a story about sadness but also healing and mending.

The first person to notice in the painting is the son who is kneeling before his father. His head is shaved in penance, his clothes are ragged, his shoes are falling off and falling apart. He has travelled a long way both physically and spiritually in his return from 'the far country'. We can sense his shame; he doesn't show us his eyes, averting them like so many of us do when we are ashamed, feeling guilty or sorrowful. His face is in shadow, hiding from the light, the light of God's grace and forgiveness perhaps.

Then we notice the father. His embrace is deeply reassuring, but it is not a bear hug trapping him in place, it is spacious and gentle. There is nothing coercive or pressured in this love. I wonder what it would feel like to be held in these hands? Healing perhaps? He also holds his son to the middle of his body, as if to a mother's womb. And if we look at the father's hands, each is very different. It is thought that one represents the mother's gentle nurturing love and the other the steadfast securing love of the father. The father's cloak is red and open, the red perhaps signifying blood and a self-sacrificial divine love which is open to all who seek it. The father's gaze is gentle and compassionate.

Then we notice the elder brother standing above and apart from this moment of authentic and genuine love, shame and forgiveness. He stands on a step as if in judgement, he looks down literally on both the spoilt younger son and the over-generous father. Whilst he shares the red cloak of the father, as his remaining heir, his is closed and contained. Where the father's hands are open and spread, the elder son's hands are clasped and held, dispensing none of the warmth of the father's love. He holds a stick forebodingly, perhaps it is a stick that could be used to punish, or a stick to be used for measuring the morality of his brother. Will the elder brother, who looks in so many ways like a younger version of the father, also echo the father's posture of forgiveness, or will he remain closed and cut off? The story doesn't tell us.

And in the background, peering in from the darkness, are three if not four people, watching this most beautiful moment of grace, yearning themselves to be held in such a gentle, loving and securing embrace. Yearning or perhaps just curious to know what it looks like or feels like to be released from such a burden of shame and guilt, drawn in instinctively to the warmth of this re-emerging family hearth and home.



Christians believe that the reason Jesus died on the cross was to mend broken relationships once and for all, like the ones in *The Lost Son*, as well as the relationship between humans and God. Because Christians believe that Jesus was fully a human being and fully God's Son, he was perfectly placed to bridge the divide that opens when humans hurt each other and God. God's promise in Jesus was that his love and forgiveness was broader, higher, and deeper than anything that humans could do wrong, even the very worst things that you can think of, like killing someone on a cross.

Jesus showed this when he was crucified on the cross by saying: "Father God, forgive them because they do not know what they are doing"; he refused to stop loving and forgiving those who had tortured him and were putting him to death. Love was stronger than hate, light was more powerful than darkness. I wonder how much love you must feel to forgive someone who is killing you.

PAUSE

Christians also believe in something called the resurrection, which means that Jesus' death is not the end of the story; they believe that the proof that Jesus had conquered evil and mended our relationship with God once and for all is based on the account by many followers of Jesus, and other

witnesses, that he conquered death and came back into new life. Just as broken relationships did not have the last word, neither did hatred, torture, and death. God's biggest YES was bigger than the world's worst NO.

PAUSE

We are now going to give you a time to think about mending your relationships with others and, if you like, with God as well. Maybe you need to let go of some anger, hatred or hurt because of something that someone did to you, or because of something that has happened to you in life. Or maybe you need to say sorry to someone, or to God, because of something you have said or done or thought which has been hurtful and harming. We might need to do the mending by forgiving or by asking to be forgiven. Both situations can feel like weights that we carry around, and the invitation is to let go of the weights, so that we and others can be free and fearless.

Let us just take a moment to think about any relationships that we think might need mending. This could be at school, at home, with friends, with brothers and sisters, parents, or grandparents, or it might be with God.

PAUSE FOR 1 MINUTE

Here are the various prayer stations:

1. The **Rembrandt poster of the Prodigal Son** should be put up near the cross. **The cross** should be the main focus of the room, with **red organza** material draped over the cross of the arm and then flowing into the room, representing the life-giving sacrifice of Jesus' death for Christians.
2. The first station you might like to consider is **a pile of heavy stones**. You are invited to pick one up and sit with it in your lap, or in your hands. As you sit with it, feel its weight, and consider whether you are carrying a weight because of a relationship with others, or with God, that needs mending. Be honest with yourself about this. When you have felt this weight, you might like to place it at the foot of the cross.
3. Another important station is the **letter-writing space**. Here there are pencils, envelopes and pieces of paper for writing a letter. This should be a letter which is about mending relationships, either saying sorry or offering forgiveness to someone else. It could also be a letter to God to help mend your relationship with God. Once you have written this letter, you might like to place it next to the cross with your stone on top, showing that you are laying this burden down.
4. There are some **electric candles** which you are invited to hold in your hands or lap. As you look at it, you can think about the light that is given when you let go of anger or hatred or hurt. You might like to place this candle next to your stone or letter and spend time looking at the candle flame next to the cross.
5. The **sterilizing tablet/vitamin C tablet** is always a popular station for children. It will be best to offer each of them one of these at the start, and to place several big bowls of water around the room. You also need some small pencils available next to the water bowls. They are invited to open the tablet packaging and to write with pencil on the tablets anything they want to let go of to mend a relationship with someone else or with God. They then pop the tablet in the water and experience the release of letting go of this burden or weight.
6. It is good to end with everyone in a circle again, perhaps round the cross, for **a prayer** or a moment of quiet reflection. If there is a Christian minister present it can be good to end with **an absolution**, in which the minister proclaims God's forgiveness for all those who have sought to mend their relationships.