

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
September 4, 2022
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV
1 Timothy 2:1-7

...so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:2b-4 N.R.S.V.)

Divine Mediation

When two parties cannot be reconciled, there is a need for a mediator. The mediator's job is to find a way to help the two parties to come to the peace table and be reconciled.

In 1968 the United States was growing tired of the Vietnam War. The Johnson Administration tried to mediate peace between North and South Vietnam. Things did not go well. The parties could not agree what shape the table should be for the talks. The first proposal was a triangular table. One side was to be for the North Vietnamese, one side for the South Vietnamese, and one side for the United States. The North Vietnamese rejected that. They wanted a four-sided table. The additional side would be for their South Vietnamese allies, the Viet Cong. The South Vietnamese rejected that out of hand, because they were not going to recognize the Viet Cong as their equals. The discussion dragged on with many models being suggested: a round table, an oval table, two semicircular tables, a round table cut in half, a "flattened ellipse," "a broken diamond," and a parallelogram.

None of these were acceptable because, in truth, neither the South nor North Vietnamese were ready to talk peace. They both hoped that they would be able to gain a more advantageous starting place through military victories. And so the war, the bloodshed, and the horror dragged on.

Today's scripture from First Timothy talks about Jesus Christ as the mediator between God and us. God made a covenant with people and we continually broke that covenant by our sins. We needed help.

Scripture often refers to God's people as "a stiff-necked people." Our ancestors in the faith, the Israelites were slow to bow their necks in submission to God. They kept insisting on doing things their own way. Hoping, I suppose, to gain additional advantages through their sins. We modern Christians are very stiff-necked too. We are slow to come to the peace table.

I heard a story once about a little boy who was caught looking through a hole in the wall of the girls showers. The teacher said, “If you don’t stop that, you will go blind.”

The next day the teacher once again found the little boy peeking into the girls showers. “What is the matter with you,” she exclaimed. “Didn’t I tell you that you will go blind, if you keep doing that?”

“You did,” said the boy. “But I thought I would just do it until I need glasses.”

I invite you to look back with me a bit at the human tendency to sin and broken relationship with God. Let’s look at those who attempted to mediate for us.

In Exodus 32, Moses attempts to be the mediator. God has just brought the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. God has brought them through the waters of the Red Sea. God has provided them food and water. Now Moses has gone up the mountain to receive the ten commandments from God.

While Moses is gone, the people decide to make a golden calf and worship that idol as their god. When Moses comes back down the mountain, he is very angry with the people. He breaks the stone tablets on which God has written the ten commandments. Moses orders that the leaders of this rebellion against God be put to the sword. Then he melts down the golden calf and grinds it into ashes. He throws the ashes into the water and forces the people to drink that same water. Wow! Moses was tough!

Moses goes back up the mountain to try to repair the damage with God. He implores God to forgive the people. Then he offers himself as a sacrifice on behalf of the people. He says, “If you won’t forgive this people. Then blot me out of the book of life.”

God rejects Moses’ offer. He sends a plague on the people and many die. But God does not completely destroy the Hebrews. The key is found early in chapter 32, Moses appeals to God’s own character not to destroy the very people God has just delivered from slavery. This is not who you are, God, says Moses. And for his own sake, God does not destroy the Hebrews.

Fast forward now to the time of King David and King Solomon. The people are still being stiff-necked. They are still sinning. The mediator now is the high priest. On one very special day of the year, the Day of Atonement, the high priest makes animal sacrifices for the sins of the people. Then at the appointed time, the high priest takes a cup of blood from the sacrifices and he goes into a very special, small room in the temple. This room is called the “Holy of Holies.” The room is separated from the rest of the temple by a heavy curtain. It is a place where the fullness of God is thought to dwell.

So sacred is this room, that only the high priest can enter, and he can only do so on this one special day of the year. It is thought that the high priest risks death by going that close to God. Before he goes into that Holy of Holies, a rope is tied to his big toe. It is a safety precaution. If

the high priest should have a heart attack or stroke while in the room, the other priests can drag him out without having to risk entering the room themselves.

On this high holy day, the high priest solemnly parts the curtain and enters the room. There is only one item in the room. It is the gold-covered ark of the covenant. The top of the ark is pure gold and has two angel statues on either end of it. The space between the outstretched wings of the angels is called the mercy seat. The high priest carefully drips blood from the cup on the mercy seat and then his work done. He retreats.

In time the temple will be torn down and the people taken into exile. With the temple no longer available, prayer takes the place of animal sacrifice. Yet, it was never enough. Something more was needed. Something that would be once and for all time and be available to all people.

Enter now, Jesus Christ. Jesus in his death and resurrection was the perfect sacrifice for all of our sins once and for all time. Once again as in the time of Moses, forgiveness comes because of the very character of God. God comes to save us, because we cannot save ourselves.

Our text says, “For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all.”

I want to call your attention to the verses that immediately precede this proclamation of the role of Jesus Christ as the mediator between us and God. We are urged to pray for our leaders so that, “All may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Did you hear that? God is not out to get us. He desires that all may be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. And in order to do that God gave of his very self in Christ Jesus. God desires that everyone be saved, reconciled to him. God desires that there be peace between everyone and God’s own self, you, me, everyone!

The Apostle Paul envisions a courtroom setting in Romans 8. There we are on trial for our sins against God. God himself is the judge. And of course Jesus Christ is the defense attorney. But who is the prosecutor?

Some might imagine that Satan is the prosecutor. But Paul reminds us that only Christ is without sin and so only Christ has the standing to bring a charge against us. The prosecutor in our case has a vested interest in us. Christ may make us aware of our sins, but he is also the one who obtains our forgiveness.

Listen to these words from Romans 8:31-39. Paul starts by reminding us that God cares for us. “What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?”

Paul goes on to talk about the role of Christ in the courtroom, “Who will bring any change

against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God who indeed intercedes for us."

Then Paul concludes, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, or life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, no powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Have you ever done something wrong and then lived in dread that you would be found out? One of my friends says that when he was in grade school, he decided that he would skip school. He went out the door that morning as usual, but he didn't get on the bus. Instead he slipped into the basement and hid there. At first that was fun, but before long he started getting worried about what would happen when his mom found out. She was upstairs so he couldn't really do anything that might attract her attention. He waited a long, long time. Finally, he couldn't stand it anymore. He went upstairs and confessed to his mom.

There were consequences, of course. One of those consequences was that his mom drove him to school. He was surprised that it wasn't even lunch time yet. He thought for sure that he had spent the whole day in the basement. But, he said, I was so relieved. I was happy to be at school.

Today we will be celebrating Holy Communion. We sometimes talk about this table as the family table of God, and so it is. Today, I want you to think about it as the peace table. Don't worry about what the table looks like or how many sides it has. What is important is what is on it. Bread, the body of Christ. Wine or grape juice, the blood of Christ.

When the invitation comes, leave your stiff-necked pride behind. Come to the peace table. Let Christ heal the distance you have put between yourself and God. Come, not because you deserve it. Come, because you are loved.

Amen.