

Healing and Reconciliation

Genesis 33:1-4; 9-10

2 Corinthians 5:16-26

Reconciliation is one of our deepest longings, to be at home with God, with others and with our own selves.

“God was in Christ”, Paul exclaims as with trumpets, “reconciling the world [the whole blooming world] to God’s own self!”

I

Let’s talk first about reconciliation with God, peace with God.

Sometimes the church preaches that we are estranged with God when we are not! It’s like they have the medicine, and so try to convince us we are sick and that they have the only cure. But is estrangement our natural condition with God?

In his classic psychology of religion, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James wrote that there are some who are those he calls “once-born”, who have from early on felt at-one with God. And there are others he calls “twice-born” who have always lived with a sense of estrangement. These are the ones who need a dramatic “second birth” experience. Where do you fit in this?

In today's passage from 2 Corinthians Paul exclaims, "We are reconciled!" Now. It is the gift of God. So he makes the plea: "Be reconciled to God!" Accept the reconciliation that now is!

And, Paul says, Christ is in the middle of it all, this peace with God. "Christ is our peace", eh wrote, "who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility with God and made us one. One with God, with others, with ourselves.

There are two main ways to look at the work of Christ here. The first is to say that Christ's life and death accomplished the reconciliation, made the peace. This is the foundation of most atonement theology.

The other way is to say that Christ's life and death *revealed* the reconciliation already there. There never was a wall. We made the wall.

Sacrifice religion that requires from us perfect lives, perfect worship, moral perfection breeds a secret animosity toward God, for how are we ever to pull this off? Paul says, you are reconciled! The use Buechner's phrases: "There is nothing *you* have to do. There is nothing you *have* to do. There is nothing you have to *do!*" This is what Paul called "grace."

Of course, there are times we have caused ourselves to be estranged, to feel estranged. When we have harmed another, or betrayed our deepest values. The we have our own work to do. But the forgiveness is there, already flowing to us.

Paul said, “Do you not know it is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance?” Self-honesty is necessary, then we can receive the kindness of God.

This past week we celebrated Juneteenth. It marks the day, June 19, 1865, when the U.S. troops arrived in Galveston, Texas, bringing the news that slavery was over and all slaves were to be set free. And this 2 years after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, and 2 months after the end of the Civil War! Paul is saying, reconciliation has happened! The peace is here: believe the news that you have never heard til now!

II

Now let’s talk about reconciliation on an interpersonal level. We need some form of it every day. By one definition reconciliation is to restore to union and friendship after estrangement. This the work God calls us to and God wants to help.

We heard today the reunion story of two estranged brothers, Jacob and Esau. Jacob had cheated Esau out of his birthright and blessing, then fled Esau’s anger. Now, years later, Jacob returns home with a caravan of treasures for Esau. Was it an act of restitution? Did he hope to appease his brother’s anger?

But when Esau saw Jacob coming, he ran, ran, to meet him, and embraced him and they kissed each other, and both wept.

When Jacob offered to his brother all the riches he had brought, Esau said, “I already have enough. Keep it all for yourself.” And Jacob said, looking into his brother’s eyes, “To see your face is like seeing the face of God!”

There are some ingredients for reconciliation on an inter-personal level. In South Africa, at the end of apartheid, the new leadership set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that required white oppressors to meet face to face with the blacks they had oppressed. The white oppressors had to listen to the stories of the suffering they had inflicted on blacks. Only with such honesty could true reconciliation happen.

Such is true in our relationships. Truth and reconciliation must go together, or else it is a surface and false reconciliation, a band-aid over a grievous wound. We must be able to bear the truth about ourselves for true reconciliation to happen. When we forgive someone, several things are happening. We no longer let the past determine the future, we give up our desire to make the past different, we let go of our desire to punish, or see the one who wronged us punished. To withhold forgiveness is attempt to control others, to have power over them.

To forgive someone is to release the wrong, and be set free from the killing residue of sin: guilt, shame and remorse. Jesus commissioned his disciples to go out and loose people, free people from their sins. God’s forgiveness and ours does that. And when we forgive, we free ourselves in the process.

We can torture ourselves with regret. God says, regret is for a moment. Now leave it behind.

III

What about reconciliation on a social scale, racial reconciliation for example? After the murder of George Floyd, there began a moment of racial reckoning. May it not pass too easily or too quickly.

Are we white people willing and able to bear the truth of systemic racism and our complicity in it? There are many in political power who want to make sure we never have to bear it, to make sure it is never taught in our schools.

The ingredients are truth and reconciliation, together, one not possible without the other. Holocaust survivor Eli Wiesel said of such historical evil, “We are not all guilty, but we are all responsible.”

In his book *How to be an Anti-Racist*, Ibram X. Kendi says that to believe we can be non-racist is an illusion, a convenient illusion. We are either racist or anti-racist and every day we wake up and make that choice in our thoughts, words and actions.

The irascible and renegade Baptist minister Will Campbell based his whole ministry on reconciliation. The name of the group he formed was katellugate, the Greek word for “Be Reconciled”. He befriended KKKers (and country music

stars). At Southern Mississippi University, in the dusty file of his papers, there is a letter. It is from Byron de la Beckwith, the KKK member who murdered Madigan Emory. It was one of the most infamous murders of the Civil Rights era. He was responding to a letter Campbell had written him, and is a testament to a friendship Campbell had initiated. Reconciliation can begin with something that small.

IV

Now finally, reconciliation with yourself, peace inside your own skin. Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron writes about what she calls *maître*, the practice of self-compassion, be-friending yourself, being gentle with yourself. We have such complicated relationships with our bodies, our selves, our weaknesses, our compulsions, our bad habits, what writer Reynolds Price calls our “loyal flaws.” Looking in the mirror we say terrible things about ourselves, things we’d never say to another.

How do we make peace with ourselves, love ourselves as God loves us? If anyone tells you this is easy, they may be trying to sell you something.

But there’s this news you’ve been needing to hear: you are God’s beloved, with all your flaws. You don’t have to be perfect. Perfectionism is a killing thing and is murder on your relationships with others. When Jesus said “Be perfect as

your *Abba* in heaven is perfect” the Greek word he used means *complete*, fulfilling what God made you to be.

You are, as the poet Hopkins put it, “immortal diamond.” In the words of Joan Baez,

You are amazing grace

You are precious jewel

You—special, miraculous, unrepeatable,

Fragile, fearful, tender, lost

Sparkling ruby emerald

Jewel rainbow splendor person

This is what God wants you to hear, you are God’s beloved in whom God takes delight.

V

So now Paul says, you are called to be ministers of reconciliation, bearers of reconciliation, giving that word of reconciliation to others, and even to yourself.

Be reconciled

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Experience the healing. Share the word to the world.

