

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/AUGUST 23, 2009

RECONCILIATION/2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21

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I. THE TEXT

In this morning's text, the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth – a church that struggled with God's call to be a house of reconciliation. In the Corinthian church, a good fight could erupt over just about anything – not only did they fuss about the finer points of theology, they got crossways over wearing hats in church and who got more of the communion wine. To this fractured church Paul writes about reconciliation. Hear the word of God from Paul's 2nd letter to the church in Corinth...

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. ¹⁸All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

II. PRAYER: Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me, Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us. May these words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts in this hour, be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer... Amen.

III. DEFINITION

As a child, I remember well the monthly ritual in which my mother meticulously reconciled our family checking account – she'd sit at the dining room table with all of her bank stuff – we knew to leave her alone. Some months it took her hours and we could feel her frustration all the way in the living room. But without fail she ultimately emerged with a sense of personal triumph – she'd reconciled the statement to the penny. I did not inherit that pathological predisposition. But that is not the sort of reconciling that Paul is writing about. I've reconciled myself to the reality that the wrinkles on my face are there to stay, I'll never golf well enough to play the in the LPGA, and will never be invited to host my own cooking show. Neither is that the nature of reconciling that Paul speaks of.

Paul's focus is on reconciled relationships. The Greek word we translate as “reconciliation” means, literally, to exchange¹ — in this case to exchange bad relations for good ones. The word implies that relationships can get broken. To reconcile is to take a broken relationship, fix it and make it good and whole again.

IV. THE HISTORY OF BROKENNESS

Indeed relationships can, and do, get broken. That is why we sometimes fear getting close to one another – not that we might get hurt, but that we might get hurt **again**. And it happens so easily. A furious moment ends in a life-long estrangement. A seemingly small wound goes unattended and, over time, ends in enduring resentment. An accidental slight

turns into a deathly silence. What once was good is now in shambles.

My hunch is that all of us have had, or have even now a strained or broken relationship or two. And it is not only in our personal, private worlds – broken relationships are splattered across our headlines with great regularity – the brokenness of black-white, male-female, gay-straight, Republican-Democrat relationships. Relationships have come apart over such trivial things as one’s preference for Bach or Bon Jovi, red carpet or green carpet. And they too often stay that way... oddly enough, it seems we human beings would rather live with the discomfort of distance than the cost of reconciliation.

It seems to be a part of the human condition that wherever two or three shall gather there you shall have the possibility of estrangement and brokenness. It has been our story from the beginning. The first relationship broken was the relationship with God. Adam and Eve decide God’s wisdom is not worth the time of day. They eat the forbidden fruit – the next thing they know there is that feeling in the pit of their stomach – things are not right. They hide, they lie – their relationship with God breaks down. The next broken relationship unfolds in a heartbeat. Jealousy sets in between Adam and Eve’s sons, Cain and Abel. In a fit of rage Cain murders Abel – ultimate brokenness. And the rest of the story of God’s people plays like a broken record of broken relationships – Abraham and Lot, Sarah and Hagar, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, David and Saul, David and Absalom, etc., etc.

Israel’s story is one not only of the brokenness between people; their on-again-off-again relationship with God fills the pages of the Old Testament. “No other gods,” God said – the first thing you know they are building a golden cow to worship – their relationship with God crumbles. Time after time after time they treat God as some old codger not worth listening to – estrangement sets in.

V. THE HISTORY OF RECONCILIATION

It would be a pretty depressing story if Scripture was just one long novel of alienation – we’d never again pick up the good book. Fortunately, there is another constant throughout the story – the theme of reconciliation. Remarkably, in spite of the people’s penchant for breaking relationships, God has a penchant for fixing them. Time after time God works to fix what is broken, to reconcile, to exchange a bad relationship for a good one. God loves the human creation far too much to give up.

The divine-human relationship gets a fresh start with Abraham and Sarah. God raises up Moses, liberates the Israelites from Egypt and the centuries long estrangement between them and God gets fixed. But again and again the relationship breaks down – they push God aside – just couldn’t be bothered. Still, God sends prophets and makes every effort to fix what is broken. Not willing to settle for the discomfort of distance, God does not sulk in some corner of the universe, playing a cosmic waiting game, but rather risks rejection – reaching out again and again, until one day a tiny baby is born.

For God so loved the world – God showed up in person – in Jesus. Why? It is our word this morning – reconciliation – God came to fix what was broken between us. God refuses to let the final word be estrangement. In Jesus Christ, because of his selfless act of carrying our sins to a cross, you and I are reconciled to God – bad relations are exchanged for good ones. It is the great news of reconciliation that we celebrate every time we gather

in this sacred space — no more brokenness and estrangement — in Jesus, our relationship with God gets fixed.

VI. MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

It is this great news of reconciliation that Paul celebrates in today's text. Allow me to read verse 18 again — “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” But the verse continues... “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” Suddenly Paul has left off with theology and, as they say in the South, has “Gone to meddlin’.” What is this “given us the ministry of reconciliation” stuff? Perhaps I should have stopped with the first half of this verse — the celebrating our fixed relationship with God part. But there it is — God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. The ministry of exchanging bad relations for good ones. Had you any idea that God has ordained you as a minister of reconciliation?

Let's think for a few minutes about that ministry. Just what does a minister of reconciliation do?

1. First, to the degree possible, a minister of reconciliation is a reconciler in their own relationships. That is easier said than done. People do us dirt, they hurt us, they won't always forgive. When we are wounded the natural human desire is revenge, not reconciliation; distance, not closeness. That is so often how it happens, two people, un-reconciled, in a position of long-term brokenness, or who will even go to their graves estranged. But the minister of reconciliation, Paul says, “sees things differently.” The minister of reconciliation will not easily give up on a relationship — because God did not give up on them.

Pastor John Ortberg tells the story of a family in his church — a mother and her daughter Sue who had fallen into the habit of verbally inflicting pain on one another — their friction eventually gave way to a lifetime of estrangement. Sue was 40 when the phone call came that her mother had been suffering from a degenerative neuromuscular disease and was nearing death. Sue made the trip home where the family gathered for a vigil that lasted days. Sue had difficulty sleeping at night and so one night stayed alone by her mother's bedside. Something began to melt her heart. “I'm sorry,” she told her mom. “I know I wasn't easy to raise.”

“Me too,” her mom said, “I'm sorry, too.”

A couple words, and for the first time since she was a little girl, Sue's heart was flooded with love for her mother. She had feared she would be cold toward her till the very end. She had not touched her mother for years; now she couldn't stop. She held her mother's hand and stroked her head and wouldn't let go. Sue lay down on the bed next to her. “I love you, Mom. I really do. I was afraid you'd die without knowing it.”

“I'll bet you were afraid you might not know, too,” her mom said. “I've always loved you but didn't know how to tell you.” At that moment, Sue said, her mother looked radiant, the way some people look when heaven is not far off. It was the last time Sue would see her mother alive. Her last, best night. And a prison door was unlocked. Two stony hearts melted. Two human beings who had lived as enemies became mother and daughter again.”²

As God fixed what was broken, so must we. Some of us this morning have broken relationships we are called to reconcile — perhaps the first step is a phone call, an email, a shared cup of coffee. The way might be difficult, but as ministers of reconciliation, we are

to forgive always, reconcile whenever possible, and not give up, just as God did not, does not, give up on us.

2. Second, a minister of reconciliation brings the message of reconciliation to the world. Paul says we are to become ministers of reconciliation not only in our personal lives, but wherever there is brokenness and hatred. The ministry of reconciliation challenges us to think through our hopes, both for the world within the walls of our houses and the world called planet earth with far too many walls already in place.

Peter Arnett, former CNN and NBC television commentator and reporter tells the story of his experience one day in Israel. He said, “I happened to be in a small town on the West Bank when an explosion went off... signs of death and destruction were everywhere. A man came running up to me holding a bloodied little girl in his arms. He pleaded with me, ‘Mister, I can’t get her to a hospital! Israeli troops have sealed off the area. No one can get in or out, but you’re the press. You can get through. Please mister! Help me get her to a hospital. Please! If you don’t help me, she’s going to die!’

Peter put them in his press car, and rushed to the hospital in Jerusalem. The whole time the man was pleading from the back seat, calling out to him, ‘Can you go faster, mister? ... I’m losing her!’

When they finally got to the hospital, the little girl was rushed into the operating room. Peter Arnett and the other man retreated to the waiting area – to sit in silence, too exhausted and traumatized even to talk. After a while the doctor came out of the operating room and said solemnly, “I’m sorry, she’s dead.”

The man collapsed in tears, and Peter recalls putting his arms around him to comfort him, saying, ‘I don’t know what to say. I can’t imagine what you must be going through. I’ve never lost a child.’

The man looked at Peter, startled, and said through his tears, ‘Oh, mister! That is a Palestinian girl – she is not my daughter. I’m an Israeli settler. That Palestinian is not my child. But, mister... there comes a time when each of us has to realize that every child, regardless of that child’s background, is a daughter or a son... and that we are **all** family.’³

By virtue of our baptism we are ordained to the ministry of reconciliation... our call is, wherever we find brokenness – be the brokenness within our family or on the job, be it between races or sexes, between gay and straight, between the well-enough-off who fear losing what they have and the have-nots who long for something better than the poverty with which they live – be it in any of the myriad fractures that our anxiety-ridden culture creates. The ministry of reconciliation – the heart of Christ’s ministry and God’s call to the church, to us, to fix what is broken, to exchange bad relations for good ones, however difficult it might be, however risky it might feel. God refuses to let the final word be estrangement... and asks us to do the same.

Amen and amen.

¹ Greek words *katallasso*, *katallage*, *apokattallasso*. Derived from *kata*=according to; *allasso*=to exchange, alter

² John Ortberg, *Everybody’s Normal Till You Get to Know Them*, page 163.

³ Recorded in *Let Me Tell You a Story*, by Tony Campolo, p. 120.