

S.031233 First Champaign, Cuba Sunday “Reconciled”

Second Reading Romans 5:1-11

1Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

6For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person — though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. 9Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. 10For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. 11But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

This text in Romans is a frequently quoted text in Christian circles. I read this text from Romans a few weeks ago in the Thursday Women’s Bible study. We were reading Adam Hamilton’s book Unafraid. This is a wonderful devotional book, by the way. This text from Romans can be a powerful source of comfort when you are in a period of struggle and in times of great pain. It has been for me. Whatever suffering I may be experiencing, this text gives me hope that the suffering will not be in vain nor will it overcome me.

Don’t get me wrong, this text does not sanction suffering. I know there are some people in history and maybe even today who have taken this passage to mean that suffering is a good thing and therefore we have to suffer to gain a kind of perfection of character, as a kind of prescriptive muscle building moral exercise. That is an abusive and wrong reading of the text.

Paul’s message here is observational. You can find individuals in the world whose trials in life have made them a stronger person. Those of you who have suffered and come through it may feel stronger because

of the experience. Knowing that God has suffered, too, as was shown to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, may give you a huge sense of a comfort. Knowing you are not alone can bring peace. Enduring can result in a kind of toughness and hope for more eternal realities. In this regard, this passage is hopeful. When you are in a place of struggle, you need hope.

But, this passage from Romans is so much more than an individual source of comfort. It is about reconciliation for the world, specifically God's reconciliation with a world that doesn't seem to understand how much the Creator yearns to love the Creation.

Reconciled. We are reconciled to God in Jesus Christ, says Paul. He declares this many places in the New Testament. The idea of reconciliation is seeded through the Hebrew Scriptures. Being reconciled is not a political or social fad. Being reconciled is our Christian identity and reconciliation is our purpose as followers of Jesus Christ.

In 1967, I was 4 years old. That year the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America declared its awareness and affirmation of the need for unity within the Church, and the need to do a better job of showing Christ's message of reconciliation to the world, because the world needed it. The UPCUSA wrote the Confession of 1967 to guide the Church as it faced these societal challenges - the Vietnam War, the heightened tensions in civil rights concerns and brutal clashes between peoples in the efforts to dismantle racism in the United States such as in Selma, Alabama. The Church had a message of reconciliation to share in those chaotic, divided times. The Church claimed racism was an evil force in the world and should not be allowed to continue. And so, the Church went to work. Many resisted.

The UPCUSA joined with the PC(US) in 1983 to become the PC(USA). It worked hard to reconcile racial divides within its own ranks even though the reunion was not perfect. Some churches split off from one solid piece of stone; indivisible, uniform. But we were faithful to our calling of reconciliation.

The Confession of 1967 in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions describes who we are in the world. It is uncomfortable at times. Sometimes who we are as reconciled leads us to broken and controversial places, which our own Compassion, Peace and Justice Ministry Team can attest having recently studied racism, prison ministry, and ways of better relationships with our LGBTGAI+ community. Or as our Cuban Partners may attest having fearfully stepped onto a plan going to a country that our own government has restrictions on. But, because God in Christ suffered with us, we know we can suffer through this kind of discomfort and have hope that there will be a better world tomorrow. This is the message of the Church in which I have lived with my whole life. I treasure it.

I bet you haven't read the Confession of 1967 lately unless by some chance you have picked it up as a devotional study during this Lenten season. In 2020 the church created an inclusive version. Listen to what it says about the Church's mission,

To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as his reconciling community....

The life, death, resurrection, and promised coming of Jesus Christ has set the pattern for the church's mission.

His human life⁷⁶ involves the church in the common life of all people.⁷⁷

His service to men and women⁷⁸ commits the church to work for every form of human well-being.

His suffering makes the church sensitive to all human suffering⁷⁹ so that it sees the face of Christ in the faces of persons⁸⁰ in every kind of need.

His crucifixion discloses to the church God's judgment on the inhumanity that marks human relations,⁸¹ and the awful consequences of the church's⁸² own complicity in injustice.

In the power of the risen Christ and the hope of his coming, the church sees the promise of God's renewal of human⁸³ life in society and of God's victory over all wrong.

The church follows this pattern in the form of its life and in the method of its action. So to live and serve is to confess Christ as Lord. (BOC, 9:31-33inclusive)

You get it. It is a step on a walk that is so much bigger than an individual's walk. It involves all of humanity.

So, in my lifetime reconciliation has been a key message of the church and a positive message that, as we proclaim it in our own brokenness, is reformed and always reforming, reconciled and continuing to reconcile.

Somewhere in the last few years the idea of reconciliation has been taken out of a Christian context and applied to psychology, social reform and politics. This is what happens when the good news is proclaimed. People examine their own spheres and apply what is good and true and just. Just because they claim to be Christian does not mean God in Christ is not at work. Just because they claim to be atheist or a-religious does not mean God in Christ is not at work.

You may hear this term reconciliation discussed in psychological circles. There is research on forgiveness and reconciliation is studied in marriage and family therapy labs by such names as John and Julie

Gottmann or Everett Worthington or John Paul Lederac. Forgiveness and reconciliation are often seen as two parts to a process of healing. Forgiveness is the letting go of the emotional power that the perpetrator has over the victim. The victim is the one who has the power to forgive. Forgiveness can take place without two parties present such as if the perpetrator has died or is unwilling to repent for the harm done. Reconciliation is the willingness of both parties to remove the divide that has occurred. Sometimes the decision is made to forgive but not to reconcile because it is not safe or unity is not desired. Everett Worthington says, "Reconciliation is restoring trust in a relationship in which trust has been damaged." There are processes and steps, decisions, discussions, and a lot of work. John Paul Lederac says, "You cannot build a bridge by starting in the middle. Bridge-builders begin from the side they are on." Reconciliation is a strengthening of foundations and a building step by step from the two pillars over the creek to join in the center. Reconciliation is not a political, liberal, social agenda but it affects all those areas. Those are the areas that the Christian is called to step into. They are human spheres and Christ worked in human spheres.

So this morning I preach the message of reconciliation. Yet, I should not be the one preaching this sermon to you. It should be Rev. Dr. Daniel Izquierdo, pastor of our sister church in Luyano, Havana, Cuba. His lifetime of exploration on this subject of reconciliation can be found in his book recently published called The Great Message. It is a wide reaching and in-depth biblical and theological analysis of reconciliation analyzing much more scripture than this text from Romans. It is academic but profound. His not being here in the pulpit is a huge example of why the message of reconciliation still needs to be proclaimed in our lifetime. He is in Cuba and because of the political and structural divisions between our two governments. It is nearly impossible for them to travel to see us. It is easier for us to go there on special, religious visas than it is for Daniel or any of the Luyano

congregation to come here. We have more money and more power to reach out to them. This reality represents another kind of disunity in our world. Reconciliation is not just for individual and personal spiritual realities but is also one of structural and public realities.

Five of us will be going to Luyano, Havana Cuba on April 20-24. Our trip is a form of reconciliation, of bringing together sisters who are separated by enmity even though the enmity does not exist within us. Coming together affirms our *hermanamiento*, our *twinsip*. We are family. We are sisters and brothers. Symbolically, our visit is huge. It is a physical proclamation that although our political realms may be damaged, Christ's love unites us. Our physical coming together connects threads. It strengthens the body of Christ. It builds up foundations. It lays down planks. It moves us toward a shared center. It surrounds enmity with a web of peace. Metaphors of reconciliation abound. It is The Great Message of the Church. We preach Christ reconciled. When we find ourselves separated by powers beyond our control, we remember...yes, we are comforted that God has already removed the real barriers. God has already shown us what we can do: we love no matter what, just like Jesus did.

To God be the glory.