

May 14th: Reconcile

Good morning again, friends! This morning we continue our year-long sermon series—we've been reading through the whole Bible from the beginning to the end and seeing how these ancient texts can be relevant to our modern lives. Along the way, we've read about nomadic people, people under empire, and now we turn to a new stage of our text which is focused on the birth of a new group of people: the very first Christians.

We've finished our study of the Gospel of Matthew, and so the next step in our journey is to examine what happens to Jesus' movement and disciples after his resurrection. For these next few weeks, we'll be taking a closer look at the early church—including the writings of the Book of Acts, and the letter to the Romans. These texts require us to carefully consider the context of these writings, so our meditations will have a little bit of everything: history, theology, and application to our own lives. Hopefully, this will bring us some insights into how we can be a part of God's big and beautiful story.

We'll get started in just a minute, but before we do, let's pray together.

Reconciling God,

In your divine presence, we can see that there is still so much work to be done to heal the brokenness of our communities. We confess that we are often quick to judge and quick to accuse, but slow to forgive and slow to trust. We come before you asking for your guidance as we seek to mend what we have fractured. Draw near to us, so that we may draw near to others and begin the difficult tasks of admitting fault, asking for pardon, and rebuilding our relationships. Amen.

For those of you who don't know this about me, I want to start today by sharing that I am, in fact, a very big Taylor Swift fan. She might not be your cup of tea, and that's totally fine, but as a millennial, I've grown up alongside her, and her music has been the soundtrack to many stages of my life. I love her catchy pop hits, I deeply relate to her angsty anthems, and I often wander my neighborhood while listening to her Folklore album.

If you're also a Taylor Swift fan, or a "Swiftie," as we are sometimes called, you know that April was a big month for her. Not only did she kick off her much anticipated Eras tour after the launch of her best selling album *Midnights*, she also announced the upcoming release of *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)*, and reportedly went through a very public breakup from her boyfriend of six years. While many fans and bystanders have made speculations about the cause of their split, there have been few details available, leading most to suspect that Taylor and Joe simply had "irreconcilable differences" that required them to part ways.

Irreconcilable differences seems to be the standard, boilerplate answer for situations like this—whether it is celebrity couples or just everyday people. Most of us have probably heard this phrase before, but might not know exactly what it means. The term is intentionally broad and slightly vague, typically used to describe any "Difference of opinion or will that cannot be brought into harmony, or cannot be brought into agreement through compromise." One prominent law firm out of New York City claims, "This justification has become increasingly common, with **more than 50 percent of all divorce cases claiming irreconcilable differences.**"

As a child of divorced parents, I just want to say that up front that I don't think divorce or breakups are necessarily a bad thing—it can even be necessary in some cases. But it does seem like a pretty significant statistic that half of the relationship breakdowns observed by divorce attorneys are because of some belief or action that is simply not able to be reconciled or brought back into a loving, committed state.

You might be wondering what Taylor Swift and her breakup have to do with our biblical text for today—and that's fair. Let me see if I can explain myself.

Perhaps the sermon title gives it away a little bit, but today we are talking about the concept of "reconciliation," not in a romantic or a marital sense, but in a human and divine sense. Reconciliation isn't a word we hear very often or

use in our day to day life, unless we're specifically talking about marriage, but it's a word that is used extensively in our biblical text, especially the New Testament.

On one of my walks this past week, I started to think more deeply about what reconciliation actually means. As I did laps around my neighborhood, I questioned what it really means to be reconciled to someone, or possibly to be in a position that is irreconcilable. If you think about it, reconciliation is NOT about everything being perfect all the time. In fact, reconciliation requires that something first be ruptured before it can be put back together. In order for something to be restored, it first has to be fractured, there needs to be something that has been severed in order for it to be reconnected.

But reconciliation doesn't just happen on its own, does it? It's not a passive process. It takes some action, some movement, some active mending, maybe even an apology and some accountability, right?

While on this walk, I was listening to one of Taylor's most famous breakup songs, titled, "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together," and I asked myself, what does it actually look like to be brought back into a relationship? Our culture does not have a lot of great examples of this, so what does it even look like to heal bonds that have previously been broken? How is this restoration possible in our contentious and divided communities? Can the relationship between God and humanity ever be damaged beyond repair?

Believe it or not, I'm not the one only wondering about the nature of reconciliation, because these are the questions that Paul attempts to figure out in this passage. And these are the questions that I hope we'll find answers to today.

But first, a little background to get us familiar with the context of this passage.

Last week we introduced the Epistle to the Romans, a letter written by Paul to the church in Rome. You might remember that we read Paul's introduction to

this congregation and his initial greetings to them during this time of tension and growth. Paul is deeply concerned with building strength and harmony within this body of new believers, and so he tells them that a priority for them should be to encourage each other in their mutual ministry.

As you might expect if you've read any of Paul's other letters, this text sometimes reads more like a boring treatise on systematic theology than a personal letter. There are lots of big words and unwieldy phrases. Paul's writing style is often a little convoluted, with run-on sentences and a distinct lack of appropriate punctuation. And that's just in Greek, unfortunately it doesn't get a whole lot easier in English.

Despite this, let's see if we can do a little translating for our modern ears.

Paul starts chapter five with these two verses, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God."

Although we've skipped over a number of chapters in this letter, Paul spends a lot of time in this particular communication detailing his belief that human beings and God should have a fractured relationship due to our inherent brokenness. Although God created all of humanity with the intent for a loving relationship, that desire was disrupted by the human impulse towards disobedience and rebellion.

And so, Paul questions how a perfect God could be in relationship with imperfect people, how a wise God could ever be in relationship with foolish people, how a peaceful God could be in relationship with the chaos of creation. It seems unrealistic to Paul that God and human beings could share a bond when we are so incompatible. However, through the person of Jesus, Paul sees that God had made an attempt at repair.

Through Jesus' earthly interactions and the sacrifice of his human life, Paul comes to understand that God has always desired that all of creation be brought back to its original and whole state. Jesus' compassion and care for others is proof to Paul that God is actively working towards the restoration of both individuals and communities. For Paul, Jesus' message of repentance and new life is evidence that God is deeply concerned with reconciling the relationship between himself and his people. Paul comes to understand that reconciliation is one of God's top priorities.

And this is good news! But for Paul, there's something even more that he wishes to share with his fellow Christ followers.

Paul says that even though human beings are born into brokenness and the messiness of existing in unhealthy systems, we don't have to earn forgiveness or meet any divine standards in order to be loved and cherished by God. In this passage, Paul shares with his fellow disciples that faith is the only necessary condition for reconciliation—it is through faith alone that we are brought back into harmony with our Creator.

And Paul writes that this reconciliation with God is not just a meaningless process—because it has an actual effect on our lives. When the relationship between God and ourselves is brought back into harmony and when we receive God's grace, it produces something important: it results in hope.

Paul continues, "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

While some people might see hope as a fruitless or overly optimistic or naive emotion, or difficult to come by in our current environment, Paul tells us that Christian hope is not based in our own power or our current reality, but in something much bigger and much greater than ourselves—God's love, which is a force so powerful that it heals the deepest wounds and mends even the most fractured of relationship. God's love, which is a force so compelling that it

overcomes all obstacles and seeks reunification with even the most distant of souls.

The overwhelming love of God is reiterated in verse 8, when Paul writes, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Even at our most injurious, even at our most harmful, even at the moment of betrayal, Jesus has already decided that we were worth the effort. Even at our most destructive, even at our most horrible, even at the moment of brutal death, God was working towards wholeness and reconciliation. There is no situation that is beyond God’s reach. There is no circumstance in which a human being is damaged beyond repair. There is no person who is unloveable to God.

I’ll be the first to admit that I sometimes struggle with Paul’s writings, but something about this passage really struck me this week.

Perhaps it’s just that I’ve been feeling a little “off” lately, or that I’ve sensed that my own personal faith is wearing a little thin after multiple mass shootings in one week. Some days, I can’t help but feel like our world is irreparably broken, like all of our fractured relationships and harmful behaviors might have the final say, and there’s no use hoping for a better system, or more just institutions, or reconciliation between people groups who profess to hate each other. Sometimes it feels like the hurts just go too deep. Sometimes it helps to name that the inequality in the world just feels so heavy. Sometimes I listen to Taylor Swift breakup songs and just cry because there are so many reasons to be brokenhearted. And not just in a romantic sense, although there is plenty of grief and loss these days for loved ones who are no longer with us, but also because people are going hungry, and our neighbors are struggling to secure affordable housing, and because parents are sick with worry that their kids may go to school but not come home.

This might not be the cheerful and uplifting meditation that you were hoping for, but I feel a little divine nudge to share that over the past few weeks, I have been losing hope, and I haven't been sure of how to get it back. Like Paul dealing with the conflict ridden Roman church, I've questioned whether or not this act of reconciliation is still possible in this kind of world. In the midst of tensions and disagreements and hostility, is it even possible that we could be restored to some kind of more peaceful and loving state? In our own fragmented communities and relationships, is it possible that God's love could still conquer all? Even those of us who have been engaged in a walk of faith for our entire lives might find that we have some serious doubts that there is a reason to have hope.

So if you're anything like me, or you've been feeling similarly, I think this passage comes at a really good time.

I think Paul's words still speak to us, thousands of years later, because we are still desperately hoping for reconciliation. Even without using that specific vocabulary, I think so many of us and so many people that we know can articulate a deep longing for a sense of harmony that is beyond just our human capacity. We ache for peace, we ache for safety, we ache for healing, we ache for a force that is more powerful than ourselves to fix what we cannot. When so much of our life is surrounded by hatred and violence, we yearn for the kind of love that brings people back together, that rights the wrongs, that soothes our hurts, that reconnects us to something or someone more holy.

Whether you've been in church for your entire life, or today is your first time in a sanctuary, this good news of reconciliation is for you. It is for you today, and tomorrow, and forever. So if this offer of reconciliation is speaking to you this morning, I hope that you take this opportunity to listen for God's voice and take the next step in your personal journey of faith. Maybe that step is simply learning more about Jesus, or maybe the step is rebuilding some hope. Whatever that next step is for you this week, I'll leave you with this good news.

My friends, there is no such thing as irreconcilable differences to our loving God. Paul reminds the Roman church of this, and I will remind us again now with these ancient words: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Amen.