

Two Sundays ago, when focusing on the theme of Physical and Spiritual Wholeness, I made this comment: "If we spend time engaging NewsMax, OAN, and *some* programs on Fox (usually the opinion stuff), or if we are engaging The Young Turks, the Huffington Post, or *some* MSNBC or CNN programming, I am going to ask you if these sources are really helping you learn to love your neighbor, or your adversary, more?" That's not quote, but it's really close.

This is what I heard back in the middle of the week: 'Some people said you said we should not be watching Fox News.' Evidently, some people felt like I was poking them about Fox, but when I look the quote, what I see is a pastoral invitation into self-reflection: "Will these sources – *from whichever end of the spectrum* – help you learn to love your neighbor or adversary more?" Because this is what Jesus asks of his followers: that we love our neighbor and our adversaries. This is Jesus' invitation into relational wholeness, which is our focus today, the final week on the Flourish theme!

If upon self-reflection, you discern that the programming you watch doesn't help you follow Jesus' commandment, then sure, I'd urge you to make following Jesus your highest priority, which I think is my role as a minister of the gospel! But it is not just my role, it's the role of every brother and sister in Christ! As Hebrews 10:24 says, "provoke one another to love and good deeds."

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While I am puzzled how my words were so misunderstood, given the hyperpolarization and hyperreactivity of the times we are in, I should not be surprised. Even so, I think this is a useful place to begin the final week in our Flourish sermon series. Again, our focus today is Relational Wholeness. [Read: 2 Corin. 5:16-20]

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Mary McClintock Fulkerson has noted that creative theological thinking "originates at the scene of a wound." While this can be said about much of scripture, it is certainly true of the letters Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. After establishing that church, Paul's letters were written to address deep wounds of division that plague that community. There are social and economic divisions. There are theological and ideological divisions. There are divisions about which preacher is more rhetorically gifted, and there are divisions about practices of

faith such as partaking The Lord's Supper and speaking in tongues.

This is the background of our reading where Paul reminds the church in Corinth of two vocational aspects of faith in Christ: 1) the ministry of reconciliation and 2) the ministry of being an ambassador of Christ. What does each entail?

First, a ministry of reconciliation is a ministry of healing or mending of broken relationships, right? Paul tells us that this is why Jesus came, to heal, to mend, our broken relationship with God. And not just with God, but with each other, because everyone is a new creation.

In our denominational rule book there is a paragraph which addresses the Mutual Responsibility of Church Membership. The paragraph includes this sentence: "A Christian is called to speak the truth in love, always ready to confront conflict in the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation." Such a lovely ideal! That we would seek to be people of forgiveness and reconciliation whenever conflict erupts!

Secondly, to be an ambassador is to represent the best of Christ to each other and to those beyond the community of faith. As we know, an ambassador must often be willing to go to a foreign land, or far away space, to be a bridge on behalf of whatever nation they represent. Christians are to consider how we are representatives of Christ Jesus.

With both of these things in mind, I interviewed Dr. Christopher Carter about relational wholeness. Dr. Carter is an UM who teaches in the Religion Department of a Catholic University, the University of San Diego. I wanted to talk with him because of two things. First, because Dr. Carter has a passion for teaching people "The Compassion Practice" which is really key to ministries of reconciliation. Secondly, because of Dr. Carter is very interested in racial reconciliation efforts.

The first question I asked Dr. Carter was this: There is so much acrimony and polarization in our society right now, and it seems like our relationship circles are shrinking to include people who just look and think as we do. Do you have a sense of how followers of Jesus are called to respond in this moment? [Video 0.00 to 3:54]

I want to highlight two things Dr. Carter said about being agents of reconciliation. First, he said that we

need to learn how to listen well to people who feel unheard. Second, Dr. Carter suggested that in order to listen, we need to avoid generalizing. When he mentioned generalizing, what popped into my mind is how often we talk about 'them', rather than talking and listening to someone who may be a part of any group that is different than ours. Jesus did both. He listened to people and he engaged with 'the other'.

I then asked Dr. Carter about the passage of scripture we're exploring today and how we might deepen our capacity to engage in ministries of reconciliation. Here's what he said. [Video: 4:31 – 7:33]

The last question I asked was about practical ways to seek relational reconciliation and wholeness. Because of his interest in bridging the current racial divisions, he offered two thoughts specific related to the wound of racism: [Video: 8:08-10:41]

I want to close with a two assertions based on this passage which are important and we finish the theme Flourish. The first is that as Christians affirm there is no brokenness God wants to leave unhealed; that there is no separation Christ did not come to bridge. Whether that be in families, in congregations, in the world, and especially between the various peoples and races of the world. Secondly, if we refuse to believe that God can reconcile all things, we are in fact denying the power of resurrection to make ALL things new. So let us embrace this vocation, to be ambassadors of Christ, participating in ministries of reconciliation. Amen.