

4th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
June 17, 2018

Text: 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 and 14-17
Theme: A Ministry of Reconciliation

Several months ago Ron Kutscher gave me an article to read that featured a woman named Kim Phuc. You probably do not know the name but you may recall the Pulitzer Prize photograph of her that was taken on June 8, 1972. In the photo she is running naked through the streets of Vietnam (along with several other children) after a napalm bomb was dropped in their village. She was naked because she had to pull off all of her clothes to protect her skin from any further burning. She was running because she feared for her life.

When we look at that photo and see the anguish and terror on the face of this innocent young girl, we are quick to say that she would be justified to hold onto her anger over what happened to her and the others. She spent over a year in the hospital undergoing painful surgeries that still leave her with scars. She recovered from most of her physical wounds but for years she was emotionally distraught.

She hated the photo because it was embarrassing.

She hated what happened to her because it was shameful.

She had a myriad of questions that had no answers that satisfied her.
Why did this have to happen to her?
What wrong did she do that would cause this kind of affliction?
Why did she survive only to live in so much pain?

Recently articles are being written about Kim Phuc because her story did not end on that fateful day. It took over a decade but she finally came to a place of peace. Her questions were answered well enough and now she lectures all over the world to tell others her firsthand account of what took place on that day and how she came to be who she is today.

I took the time this week to listen to one of her presentations which can be found on YouTube. It was very powerful and very moving. With poise and grace she talked about how difficult it was to forgive those who caused her so much pain and suffering. She talked about holding onto her anger and the effect that had on her.

And then she shared what happened to her when she read Luke 6:27-28. She thought to herself ... this is an impossible thing that God was asking of her.

Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.

Bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you.

In her struggle with the true intent of this text she started to pray a lot more and soon she could no longer hold that hatred in her heart. Her faith in Christ and her consistent prayers taught her to be positive and to count her blessings and to minimize her complaints. She learned to trust in God totally and then she was able to forgive the wrong that was done to her.

We discuss forgiveness all the time because it is so challenging for us but rarely do we speak of its benefits. The benefits that Kim Phuc received from being able to forgive the unimaginable is that she can now stand before crowds of people and rejoice that the photograph no longer represents what was taken away from her but instead leads her on a path towards peace. Today she is a wife and mother. She is not a victim but an advocate. She is a mentor and a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations. She formed an international foundation to assist children who are victims of war.

And she ended her presentation with these words:

I really want to thank God that he spared my life when I was a little girl. Whatever happened to me, I have another opportunity to be alive, to be healthful, to be a blessing, to help honor other people.

Last week we encountered the sin of Adam and Eve and now we have the opportunity to discuss the ministry of reconciliation. As Kim Phuc learned from her study of Scripture, once we understand our relationship with God through Christ then we can better understand our relationship with one another and we can do what at first glance seems impossible.

What exactly does it mean to be reconciled? In the Greek it means to make something other than what it currently is ... so when we say we are reconciled to God that means that God takes his wrath (which we deserve because of our disobedience) and God changes it into grace.

It means that Kim Phuc took her anger and made it into a positive response that benefited not only herself and her family but those who found themselves in a similar situation. Reconciliation is a process of letting go of the past in order to live at peace in the future.

So I searched Scripture to find some passages that would help us on our journey of faith towards reconciliation with God and with others. I commend to you the 2nd Chapter of Ephesians where we read that reconciliation is accomplished through Jesus Christ. Christ breaks down our walls of hostility and brings about peace. Christ puts to death our differences.

And in our lesson for today we read that reconciliation can change the way we treat each other in a very dramatic way. With Christ in our lives we no longer look at another person from a human point of view. We see them through the eyes of Christ who is constantly reshaping us and them. We hear today that if we are in Christ then everything old will pass away and everything will become new.

It is the love of Christ that urges us on to forgive as we have been forgiven. If that was the passage that Kim Phuc read (along with the challenge of Luke 6) then it is no wonder that she understood better her relationship with God through Christ and it is no wonder that she learned how to forgive. Once we have been accepted and held in the grace of God we must do likewise. The heart of her story is a story of conflict and death but it turned into a story of love and growth because she could put her story next to the story that God wrote for us. And once she stood at the cross of Christ she could with courage turn her attention to others with poise and grace.

This is the power of the gospel message. We are offered a new world of possibilities and a new future. Later in the letter to the Corinthians Paul will tell us that now is the acceptable time. Now is the time to be reconciled to God. Now is the time to recognize the incredible thing that God did when his Son hung on that cross. Now is the time for us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Now is the time to be the ambassadors of that message. Now is the time. We reap the benefits when we engage in the ministry of reconciliation. It allows us to receive and to offer true dignity.

I pray to God that our stories of reconciliation will never mirror those of Kim Phuc. But sometimes it takes these extreme examples of forgiveness for us to realize that we can believe in the same for us.

Paul makes it clear that when we forgive then we affirm our love for the other person. And anyone whom we forgive – others will forgive as well and so it benefits the whole. And I like this benefit the best: *We forgive so that we may not be outwitted by Satan.*

Let the love of Christ urge us on! Like Kim Phuc we thank God that he spared our lives. And whatever has happened to us in the past, we have another opportunity to be alive, to be healthful, to be a blessing, and to help honor other people. Amen