

## THE GOSPEL OF RECONCILIATION

Before I read this morning's Scripture, let me state our three points. In these verses we have an implied rift, and we're also going to see reconciliation and responsibility.

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:18-21)

### 1. Rift

In 1994, Alvin Straight learned that his estranged brother Lyle had suffered a stroke. Alvin's physical impairments prevent him from obtaining a driving license, so he made alternative travel arrangements: he hitched a trailer to a 30 year-old John Deere tractor with a max speed of 5 or so miles per hour and drove a riding lawn mower 240 miles to visit his brother and make amends.

Who doesn't love a good reconciliation? How often in a novel or feature film two beloved characters suffer a rift in their relationship, and we read chapter after chapter, we watch scene after scene waiting and waiting for their reconciliation. In *King Lear*, the titular character disinherits his daughter Cordelia, who later forgives and reconciles to her much-abused and now mad father. In the *Chronicles of Narnia*, the youngest son Edmund betrays Lucy, denying Narnia's existence, and then betrays his whole family to the white witch; but later, happily, they are reconciled. It is a theme played out over and over and over again, and it's what we have in our Scripture reading this morning.

The focus of these verses is reconciliation: re being the prefix meaning again and conciliare being Latin for to assemble or unite; so reconciliation is a re-assembling or reunion; and a reconciliation indicates a rift. So when the apostle Paul writes reconcile and derivations thereof five times in just three verses, he is pointing out a rift, an estrangement, an alienation between two parties in a relationship. After all, when a relationship is running smoothly - when, for example, there is mutual love and fidelity between husband and wife, there is no need for a reconciliation; but when there's a breach of the marriage covenant that's when we talk about a couple seeking reconciliation. So there's a rift or estrangement or alienation; and we learn more about that in Paul's letter to the Colossians.

We read, "At one time you were far away from God and were his enemies because of the evil things you did and thought." (Colossians 1:21) Who was estranged: us and God. Why were we estranged? Because of our sins, because of the evil things we did and thought.

### 2. Reconciliation

How? These verses show us the reconciler, the reconcillees, and the Mediator betwixt the two. First, the reconciler is God. Look again at verse 19, "God was reconciling the world to himself..." Some people have bought into the false doctrine that we must reconcile ourselves to God, and they furnish different answers as to how we effect that reconciliation. Some say that we reconcile ourselves to God by personal piety, they say that if we only do enough good deeds, nailing one to another to another, we can build our own bridge spanning the gulf separating us from God. If we

spend time each day in private devotions, if we faithfully attend church and participate in its corporate worship services, if we put money in the offering plate and don't break the laws, etc. we can reconcile ourselves to God. But as we read in Isaiah, "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags..." (**Isaiah 64:6**) We can put on what we think is a sharp-looking, fine-tailored three-piece suit of good works but in the eyes of the thrice Holy God we're wearing tattered blue jeans and a stained, ratty-old t-shirt. This verse is very clear: we don't reconcile ourselves to God, God reconciles us to himself.

Second, the reconcilee is us. "God was reconciling the world (that's us)" I've shared this story before, but it is my favorite and - I think - one of the best illustrations of reconciliation. In South Africa, a frail black woman, seventy years old, faced the white security officer just convicted of murdering her son and husband. He had shot her son and burned his body. Several years later, they abducted and beat her husband, killing him by burning him alive. Now, she was looking him in the face, hearing his confession, and having to answer the question posed by a member of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission: "How should justice be done to this man who so brutally destroyed your family?" The old woman answered, "Three things: First, let me return to where they killed my husband, that I might gather his dust and bury him. Second...my son and husband were the only family I had...So I want that white security officer to be my son, to visit me twice a month and spend the day with me so I can pour out on him all the love I have left to give. Third, I want someone to help me across the courtroom so I can hug him and let him know that he is truly forgiven."

Why would this woman want to be reconciled with this criminal most of us would condemn as despicable and horrible and worthy of multiple life sentences or even death. Why would she want to be reconciled to this man who had caused her so much pain and sorrow and loss. Likewise, why would God want to reconcile us to himself? To quote one hymn, "Guilty, vile, and helpless we." Look at some of the ways we are described in Scripture: Ephesians 2 says we were objects of wrath, Romans 5 says we were God's enemies. Why would the thrice Holy God want to reconcile sinful humanity? Why would the Creator want to be reconciled to the creatures who had rejected and killed his beloved and only-begotten Son? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." God wants to reconcile us to himself because God loves us even when we were not loveable. Such is the amazing, inexhaustible love of God, that he is able to love what isn't worth loving.

Third, the mediator - "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ." In the book of Job, Job divulges his desire for a mediator with God, saying, "Nor is there any mediator between us, who may lay his hand on us both." (**Job 9:33**) But while Job did not know the mediator whom he sought to stand between him and God, we do and his name is Jesus Christ - 100% man and 100% God, the incarnate Deity. As human he lay one hand on humanity and as deity he lay one hand on God, standing between and reconciling them. We read in 1 Timothy, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (**1 Timothy 2:5**) And how did this mediator effect reconciliation? With his sacrifice. "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile all things to himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." (**Colossians 1:19-20**) Or look again at verse 21: God made him who had no sin (*1 John calls him Jesus Christ the Righteous, Hebrews says he was tempted in every way as we are yet did not sin. He is sinless, yet God made him who knew no sin*) to be sin for us (*Jesus was made to be sin, or as the Message reads, "God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong."* *God the Father laid on God the Son the iniquity of us all, so that when he looked down on the cross of Calvary he saw his beloved and*

*only begotten Son completely covered in sin*), so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. *(Remember, sin is what estranged or alienated us from God; but Jesus Christ the righteous became sin so that we who were sinful, in Christ, might become the righteousness of God. We said before that all our righteousness is filthy rags; but in Christ we are not righteous before God in our own filthy and deficient righteousness but the righteousness of God; and this righteousness is by faith, as we read in Romans: "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." - ROMANS 3:22*

The Gospel of Reconciliation then is this: 1. We were estranged from God by our sins. 2. God reconciled us to himself through Christ Jesus, the only mediator between God and man, through his precious blood.

**3. Responsibility** - Now, we have seen the rift: sin separated us from God...our sins fixed a great gulf betwixt us. We have seen the reconciliation: God, and not we ourselves, reconciles us to himself in Christ Jesus who has made peace by the shedding of his blood on the cross. Finally, let's look at our responsibility. We read, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself..." and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." God, in the person of his Son, put the message of reconciliation, i.e. the Good News of Jesus Christ into our hands, and said "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation." (**Mark 16:15**) And Paul continues in this chapter to say, "So we are ambassadors for Christ." If President Obama appointed Tom Kaeb as the new ambassador to Germany, what does that mean except he that he represents his country while living in another. Likewise, we are ambassadors of Christ, meaning he is our King, his kingdom is our native country, and we are charged with the responsibility of representing him while living in another country, i.e. this world. We have received the message of reconciliation, and we have been reconciled to God in Christ Jesus our Savior and Lord; and having thus benefited - now enjoying peace and friendship with God - we ought to tell the world around us by our words and Christian conduct that yes, they are God's enemies, they are objects of wrath, they are sinful creatures in the sight of the thrice Holy Creator - but they too can be reconciled to God in the person of Jesus Christ who makes peace by his blood on the cross.

In closing, there are some people who think that they are saved because they know about God; but there is a vast difference between knowing about God and knowing God. I could know about George Washington: that he was the commander of the Continental Army during the American Revolution, the 1<sup>st</sup> President of the United States, that he had wooden teeth, etc. I could know enough about Washington to write a book - but I don't know Washington, i.e. I have no personal knowledge, I have no relationship with him. You can know about God - that he is eternal and infinite and almighty and good and holy and loving...but that's not the same as knowing him personally; and eternal life depends on having that personal knowledge. As Jesus said, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (**John 17:3**) The gospel of reconciliation reminds us that Christianity is not about knowing about it's about knowing, it's not about rituals or regulations but a relationship fashioned when two opposing parties - God and us - are reconciled in Christ our only mediator. Let us then praise God for his free gift of salvation, for reconciling us to himself in his Son; and let us praise our Lord Jesus Christ who made peace betwixt us by the shedding of his precious blood. And let us serve as more faithful ambassadors of Christ, proclaiming the gospel of reconciliation.