

Reconciliation and Life

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and Matthew 5:21-37

Talking about one's dissertation is a bit like talking about your kitchen re-modeling, or summer vacation, or grandchildren. People make a good show of appearing interested, but 30 seconds into it, it's all over. Though I must say that's not true, of course, when *you* all tell *me* about *your* grandchildren.

But let me tell you just a little about mine – dissertation, that is, not grandchildren. Most people live with their topic for several years – I liked mine so much I lived with it for almost seven years. I wanted something that related to Presbyterian history, with some theology thrown in, but that also addressed the political and cultural world in which we find ourselves.

So, I landed on the Presbyterian Confession of 1967 – named so, cleverly, because that's the year the Presbyterian Church adopted it. I can speak for hours on it – its background, its creation, the controversies surrounding it – how for some it breathed life back into the Presbyterian Church while others thought it signaled us signing our death warrant.

The theme of the Confession of 1967 was reconciliation, based on II Corinthians 5:19 – In Christ, God was in the world, reconciling the world to God. And therefore, we are called to a ministry of reconciliation.

That meant to the writers not only individual and personal relationships, but on a broader stage. Remember, this was the 1960's, so that stage included war, race, poverty and matters of gender and sexuality. In fact, the writers seemed to assert that a lack of reconciliation on the human stage weakened our sense of reconciliation with God.

As I said, the confession was not without controversy. Some argued that it said the wrong things about the Bible. Others argued that it said the wrong things about Jesus.

There is a line that affirms that we must work for racial reconciliation in all matters of life, including marriage. That affirmation challenged what were known as miscegenation laws, whereby in some states, people of different races could not be married.

There is a line that affirms that we must pursue reconciliation between nations, "even at risk to national security." That's what it says: "even at risk to national security." This was so controversial that a Department of Defense official had to declare that one could remain a Presbyterian and still work at the Pentagon.

Reconciliation has implications.

I continue to be grateful for what I learned in that process. My gratitude is deepened every time I think of that theme – reconciliation – and its implications. Implications about how we relate to God, and therefore how we relate to one another and how we relate to the world in which we live.

That litany of cultural and social implications of reconciliation– race, poverty, war, human sexuality – seems more than a little timely some 55 years later, as do our culture’s roadblocks in seeking and experiencing reconciliation.

We are fragmented and fractured. The quest for reconciliation implies an acknowledgement of brokenness, and perhaps that’s why this is so challenging. But it’s worth it, every time, this hard and good work.

Every Sunday we pray a prayer of confession. I am asked about this from time to time. Some think that’s to make us feel guilty, to make us feel like we are wretches, as the old hymn goes. And I must confess that an element of religion has functioned that way. Guilt and shame. That is hugely problematic in terms of the true nature of Christian faith.

Jesus’ words are big ones this morning, and he says some things, that frankly, there are times I wish he hadn’t said them. He is interpreting the Ten Commandments, emphasizing what they always were – communal standards – rather than a legalistic checklist to earn God’s favor.

He speaks about marriage, as well as the words we use to characterize others. This is a deeper conversation about morality than the one religion is often tagged with, so much more than a restrictive list of do’s and don’ts, of prohibitions and restrictions.

But he begins this morning with a challenge, an invitation to live life differently. He is discussing murder, which, of course, he condemns. But what he suggests is that a broken relationship, a dispute, a conflict, with another, is something similar to murder, that a kind of death happens when two people are at odds with one another, are estranged. So much so that he says it is preferable to seek reconciliation with that sister or brother than to go to worship in the temple, that the very quality of our relationship with God is affected when we are alienated from another.

That is profound. We know it to be true, I believe, even as we know how difficult it is.

The recovery community, Alcoholics Anonymous and others, know this. The 12 steps of recovery offer a roadmap of reconciliation. They include admitting to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. Making a list of all persons we have harmed, and becoming willing to make amends to them. Making direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

That is powerful in terms of recovery, but it underscores what Jesus would have us do. Seek reconciliation with those with whom we have a broken relationship. It is the goal of marriage and family counseling. It is the goal of the growing legal practice of mediation, to seek some form of resolution apart from the traditional path of litigation.

This feels more than a little like Jesus is meddling in our private lives, telling us how we should interact with one another. But how many of us, and how often, have been wounded? And how many of us, and how often, have done the wounding? Big events or little. Big words or little. Big sins or little. But we've limped along in a diminished way as we've wrestled with how to make things right. And when we've done so, when we've risked that difficult conversation, what relief we've experienced. A co-worker. A friend. A spouse or partner or child.

- Seeking forgiveness or accepting it is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength.
- It is not a sign of saying that the offense did not matter. It is saying that it did not matter so much that it would control my life.
- It is not a sign of forgiving and forgetting. It is saying that in my forgetting and remembering, I will put the wrong in its proper place, and live into a new reality.
- It is saying that brokenness is not the life God intends for us, but rather healing of brokenness by acknowledging fault, fallenness, shortcomings and moving through them to hope.

It is risky and vulnerable. But Jesus insists to us, and we know it to be true, that the risk is worth it.

Just as it was Christ's hope in South Africa as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established after the abolition of apartheid. Witnesses who were identified as victims of human rights violations were invited to give statements about their experiences, and some were selected for public hearings. Perpetrators of violence could also give testimony and request amnesty from both civil and criminal prosecution. The commission was seen by many as a crucial component of the transition to full and free democracy in South Africa. It takes reconciliation from the individual, one-to-one level, and places it on a broader stage.

This is not about forgiving and forgetting, but rather remembering, rightly, in order to move toward reconciliation. Christ's hope.

Or move from apartheid to the events in the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. October 2006 – 10 young girls shot, five dead. You will remember the story, just an hour or so from here. The Amish response of forgiveness in the wake of the tragic schoolhouse shooting shocked the world. Forgiveness quickly became the big story, eclipsing the story of violence. People did not understand, or did not believe.

When interviewed, and asked why and how, many Amish referred to the Lord's Prayer. They pointed out the statement that says, "Forgive us our transgressions (we say "debts," others say "sins" or "trespasses") as we forgive those who transgressed against us." For the Amish, Donald

Graybill writes, “forgiveness is not a one-dimensional relationship between an individual and God. Rather, their acceptance of God’s forgiveness means that they need to pass it on to others and, if they balk at forgiving others, they may jeopardize their very salvation. ‘If we don’t forgive, we won’t be forgiven,’ they say.” (See <http://www.amishnews.com/amishforgiveness.html>)

This is risky business, leaving us at our most vulnerable. Whether on the global stages of South Africa or Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, or the personal stages of a difficult family dynamic, reconciliation is elusive, and challenging. But I believe it to be at the heart of God’s hopes for us, and central to Jesus’ ministry.

It is more than a dissertation topic, but a roadmap to healing and recovery, to liberation and freedom. We know it, and we know what consumes us, what energy is wasted, as we hold grudges, as we hold things against others, as we wait, day after day, for things to be different without taking the steps to make them so.

This is risky, which we don’t like. And it leaves us vulnerable, which we also don’t like. It was a central ingredient in the ministry that got Jesus killed, and even on the day he died he exercised it, seeking forgiveness for those who perpetrated his death, and offering forgiveness to a thief crucified next to him.

Vengeance and retribution – in matters like apartheid and murder – would be so much easier, and simpler. Holding grudges – in matters like the relationships we find ourselves in each day – would be the same.

But we know, in our spirits and in our hearts, how true this is, how much it matters. Our task, like faith itself, is to live into this promise day by day, moment by moment. Our task is to choose life, as Moses recounts in Deuteronomy. Choose life in the face of brokenness, in the face of estrangement, in the face of separation. Choose life in the face of racism and poverty, in the face of warfare and hunger and homelessness. Choose life in the face of death, Moses says, in order that we may live.

Be reconciled, in order that we may live. We receive the gift of reconciliation even as we seek to reflect it, in this broken and fearful world in which we are called to live, by the Spirit’s grace, in hope and love and peace. Amen.