

Reconciliation: Trying It All Together
2 Corinthians 5:16-19 and Colossians 3:12-17
September 29, 2019
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Today is the last Sunday of our study on our new mission statement, which I have been leading you throughout the month of September. Turn to the sermon note page where you will find this statement along with the 5 principles we will use to accomplish it. Let's review it together:

VPC's Mission Statement: To make Christ known through reconciliation while communicating respect and love to all people.

The principles to accomplish this are:

- Worship that glorifies God
- Growing in our faith in love, hope and the peace of Christ
- Caring for the children of God
- Reaching out to the community and the world
- Seeking an attitude of servant-hood

I have chosen the Colossians 3 passage to encompass our mission statement and the 5 principles. We have been using this same passage for our study. Then each Sunday, I add another scripture passage that gives the theme for the day.

We have used the word "hospitality" to describe the last part of our mission statement: communicating respect and love to all people. We spent one Sunday looking at principle #1: Worship that glorifies God. Last Sunday, we looked at principle #5: Seeking an attitude of servant-hood.

Today we are going to look at the key word in our mission statement, the word that ties everything together: reconciliation.

When our new mission statement first came out, this is the word (reconciliation) people didn't like. I heard people say such things as: I don't understand it. What does reconciliation mean? It's too churchy of a word. I like our old mission statement better.

My purpose this morning is to show you how the word reconciliation is a great word, a word that is so needed in our contentious culture today. Our new mission statement is relevant and current.

In our scripture passage, the apostle Paul was having a dispute with the Corinthians. They were viewing him from a “worldly point of view.” He doesn’t have the powerful presence and demeanor that they expected. They are frustrated because Paul says he is going to visit, and then he doesn't come; thus Paul appears to be a man who does not keep his word.

Paul, on the other hand, views the Corinthians as his very own. He loves them. He is pained that they are drawn to teachers other than him, and he desperately desires to achieve reconciliation with the community. Five times in three verses he repeats the word "reconciliation."

It is said that a song becomes popular when it has simple lyrics, and those lyrics are repeated often in the song.

Here are some examples:

Ding, Dong the witch is dead.

Which old witch, the wicked witch.

Ding, Dong the wicked witch is dead.

OR

It's a small world after all

It's a small world after all

It's a small world after all

It's a small, small world

These songs, when popular, played over and over in our heads, didn't they? What makes them addictive is a chorus that is repeated frequently using a limited vocabulary. There is a popular song called "Shut Up and Dance." It became a hit song because it took four simple words and repeated it 12 times.

In our scripture passage today, the Apostle Paul takes a word and repeats it often. The word is reconciliation. In a sense, Paul is singing a song of reconciliation and he repeats the lyrics often starting with verse 18: "All this is from God, who *reconciled* us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of *reconciliation*; that is, in Christ God was *reconciling* the world to himself ... and entrusting the message of *reconciliation* to us. ... on behalf of Christ, *be reconciled* to God"

Reconciliation is the very heart of the Christian faith. It is important. So let's try and understand it.

There is a banking term that is going out of style, but many of us still use it: reconciling a bank statement with a checkbook. One of the comments I heard about the word reconciliation in our mission statement is that the word is too churchy. However, reconcile is a word borrowed from the world of finance. It involves getting the checkbook and bank statement to agree with each other, no longer dispute one another.

Reconcile also comes from the political world. It refers to dispute resolutions. So one could speak of the reconciliation between warring nations or disputing politicians. Reconciliation is not only in the finance world and the political world, it is in the sphere of personal relationships, perhaps the reconciliation of an estranged husband and wife. It is a word used by everyone. Everyday. Even by God.

The apostle Paul says that God "reconciled us to himself through Christ" (v. 18). God has worked through Christ to resolve a dispute with us, repairing the relationship between humans and God that had been broken by sin. We are the ones who broke the relationship, therefore we should be the ones who repair the relationship. But the amazing part is God was the one who reached out and restored the relationship between humans and God through Christ.

And now, since God has reconciled us to God's self, our passage says God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. The work of reconciliation has been started by God and now Christians are called to carry it on resolving disputes between individuals and communities.

From a worldly point of view, it's easy to see disputes between people as that is just the way life is. One friend says the wrong thing to another friend, and that's it. Romances break up, friends drift apart. In congregations, people come, people go. Some people like each other, some people can't stand each other. The person to whom you were once close is now the one you don't speak to anymore. It happens all the time. That's life, right?

But Paul says we are not to see each other in a worldly point of view. Remember what he said in the beginning of our scripture passage? "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (Note the exclamation point!) It actually says, "If anyone is in Christ.....New Creation!"

We are a new creation, therefore we are to relate to each other the way God has related to us. Reconciliation is not simply something to be desired; it becomes an imperative because we have experienced reconciliation with the One who has given us (new) life. Therefore, we have been given the ministry of reconciliation.

What this literally means is that God is "placing in us the word of reconciliation." This means that God has not only entrusted reconciliation to us, but implanted it in us. We don't announce it; we embody it.

I didn't have Esther read the next couple of verses from 2 Corinthians 5. Verse 21 says this: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

That we might *become* the righteousness of God.

What does that mean? Look at it this way:

Note that Paul doesn't say: "so that we might *know* about the righteousness of God." He doesn't say "so that we might *believe* in the righteousness of God." He doesn't say "so that we might *proclaim* the righteousness of God." He doesn't even say "so that we might *be justified* by the righteousness of God." Rather, he says, "so that we might *become* the righteousness of God."

Our commission from God is that we as a community are called to embody the righteousness of God in such a way that the message of reconciliation is made visible in our midst. In other words, we practice it a lot. We live it. And it is seen.

So if you are like me right now, I am going....Wow! This is amazing! Mind blowing! Stunning! But....

...how do we live up to this?

Well, I decided to look up some stories of reconciliation as examples for us. I googled "Stories of reconciliation." Do you know what came up often? The story of Rwanda. I wanted to avoid big, national stories of reconciliation because most of us live ordinary everyday lives with a small group of people. But as I read about the story of Rwanda, I saw that it was a story of simple relationships being restored between small groups of people, even one on one. And this affected a nation.

It was April 7, 1994. Rwanda erupted into violence. One ethnic group turned on another. Neighbor turned on neighbor, family turned on family, friends turned into enemies, love turned to hate. 800,00 people were slaughtered in 100 days.

The story of what happened after the genocide is chronicled in a book called "As We Forgive: Stories of Reconciliation from Rwanda" by Catherine Claire Larson. She tells seven stories of how friends forgave one another. One reader said, "The human tragedy in Rwanda is being reversed through the process of forgiveness, so intense is this phenomenon that a nation is being transformed from one divided to one unified." Just by people practicing reconciliation with their families, their neighbors, with one another.

The author says about the stories of reconciliation in her book: "Read their stories. Let the healing that these men and women have experienced after the unthinkable be a balm to the wounded places in your own life. Let the courage and grace they have found to extend forgiveness give you a hunger to find what they have found and begin to dream another dream for your future."

Yes, we can embody reconciliation.

It says it in our Colossians passage, too. “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

I don’t know what God is going to do with the word “reconciliation” among us. I pray it is starting to enter into our minds and hearts and souls. From our past as a church, we have many broken relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ. I have broken relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

But I hear stories from you. Many of you have come up to me and said you have seen some former members at a restaurant or grocery store. You tell me that you go up to that person to reconnect a bit. Small steps towards reconciliation. And I am encouraged.

I heard from others of you that some of the people who left our church were some of your closest friends. Yet, you have maintained the friendships even though their leaving hurt you. I am encouraged.

Often, I get reports from you of someone who used to go here and is sick, in the hospital. And you visit them. And we pray for them. I am encouraged for you are beginning to embody reconciliation.

We come to the end of the study of our mission statement and the five principles to accomplish it. I call you to communicate respect and love to all people through the act of hospitality. I call you to express thanksgiving to God with the act of worship that glorifies God. I call you to show God’s love, grace and mercy to others through the act of reconciliation. Let’s keep singing the song of reconciliation together, keeping it simple and repeating it as frequently as we can.

And do it all with a servant heart.

And in all that you are called to do within our mission statement, I pray for you our Colossians passage. I pray you will clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. I pray you will forgive each other as the Lord has forgiven you. I pray you will do all of this in love. I pray that the peace of Christ will rule in your hearts. I pray for thankfulness to fill your heart. I pray the word of Christ will dwell in you richly as you worship God with gratitude in your hearts. And I pray that whatever you do, you do it in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

With that, we are going to practice an act of reconciliation. Please stand, turn to those near you and say, "The peace of Christ be with you." And remain standing.

Affirm our faith together with The Apostle's Creed