

## Reconciliation: A Concept for all Seasons

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21: Ephesians 2: 11-16

I want to talk with you this morning about reconciliation. It is an unusual word, one we do not ordinarily use except perhaps when we go through that sometimes tortuous process of reconciling what the bank thinks we have in our account with what we or Quicken thinks we have. Webster's dictionary tells us that reconciliation is "the process of making compatible, of bringing several things into harmony."

As you heard – the message of reconciliation is at the center of our scripture lessons today. The early church in the years after the death and resurrection of Jesus and after Pentecost was split. Was the message of the cross solely for the Jewish community from which the disciples had come? Or was the message of Jesus intended for all people Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised alike. There were, among the disciples, those, including Jesus' brother James, who felt that only observers of Jewish rules and laws could become followers of Jesus. Thus, it was that circumcision became an issue. It was a symbol of the observance of rules and laws that, for many, were a precondition to becoming a follower of Jesus. Paul disagreed with this view, and it was against this background that Paul and his followers wrote to the churches at Corinth and Ephesus, whose members were Gentile followers of Jesus and therefore were not circumcised. To them Paul proclaimed that it was God's purpose through Jesus to break down the walls of separation and hostility between Jew and Gentile, and that through Jesus' death on the cross, Jew and Gentile had been made one and reconciled in a new covenant with God. Circumcision and obedience to the Jewish laws were no longer necessary for receipt of God's salvation.

Now I am certainly no theologian or biblical scholar, and reconciliation is a difficult concept. However, It seems to me that what Paul was saying is at the very heart of the New Testament.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God forgave the sins of each of us whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free. He accepted each of us regardless of our differences -- for what we are --knowing what we can become if we follow Jesus. That is the ultimate embodiment of reconciliation –it is acceptance, **but not just acceptance**. It is acceptance without conditions imposed and without having to earn it by conduct or observance of rules or laws. That, of course, is not the end, but the beginning. Having been accepted we are then challenged to follow our faith in God and become that which we can in fullness become. But it starts from acceptance—from reconciliation.

**That kind of acceptance is a rare commodity!** There are few situations in our lives in which one does not have to prove her or himself to gain acceptance. Life sometimes seems to be like a constant tryout for some endless play, with always more lines to read and new directors to please.

Many of us had the joy of seeing a small child light up at our mere presence, with **no** demands made and **no** conditions imposed. Perhaps that is as close as we get to that kind of acceptance.

There is a further and equally important aspect to reconciliation as Paul saw it. It is not just that the barriers between God and us have been broken down, but the barriers --the walls that separate us from each other --have been broken down as well. If we are not separated from God, because God forgives our imperfections and failings, then those imperfections and failings -- indeed our differences -- cannot and must not separate us one that transcends our differences of

culture, of religion, of language, of from each other. We are all equal in God's forgiveness and Love, and race, of economic status, and of political and social view. God's love and forgiveness breaks down the barriers of ill will generated by our imperfections. **Indeed who are we to erect barriers between us when God has torn them down!**

I was reminded of the meaning and importance of reconciliation on a Memorial Day not too many years ago when I was living in Washington D.C. Fearful that I had lost sight of the importance of that day amongst the bombardment of storewide clearance sales and holiday celebrations, I decided to visit the Viet Nam War Memorial on the mall in Washington. Some of you have undoubtedly visited that memorial and will remember it. For those of you who have not seen it, it is a long wall slightly below ground level made up panels of polished black granite etched with a sea of names **reflecting** in chronological order each American who died in that war. In its simplicity and stark beauty it is a moving and fitting memorial to those 56,000 who gave their lives. Yet it is not just a memorial, but an embodiment of reconciliation, especially a belated reconciliation with and acceptance of those who served in that war.

I must confess that I am of that generation marked in an indelible way by that war. Whether soldier or civilian, we were either hawk or dove, and we wholeheartedly supported the war as a national responsibility or strongly opposed it as morally wrong. There were few who remained neutral. Indeed, that was the case for more than those of soldiering age or their families. Who among us of age then-- will ever forget those color films on the evening news day in and day out, showing the horror of the war? Never before had war been on our nightly news. Never had it been brought so close, to so many, so often. One can only wonder what our news may look like in the weeks and months to come. Back in the 60s and early 70s we all felt strongly about the war. We demonstrated for and against it, to the point that the President

became a captive in his own White House. We still feel it today. The debates on the possible, indeed probably, war with Iraq echo the positions espoused during the Viet Nam war. And rightly remind us of the risks of national policy conceived behind closed doors and unlevended by true national debate.

The depth of our feeling and differences over the Viet Nam war were reflected in the reception given those who served there. To those who believed that the war was a national responsibility, those who fought became the symbols for the failure of that effort. They were “the losers”. For those who felt that the war was morally wrong, those who fought took the brunt of that moral stigma. After these veterans returned, they were generally ignored and frequently shunned. They were our outcasts. It was, therefore, surprising that this simple memorial, should have the effect at least in a small way of serving to reconcile those holding diverse views about the war and to reconcile in a small way those who did not serve with those who did.

As I thought about that memorial after my visit, I became convinced that in its simple honoring of the dead, it served to remind all of us --whether pro or anti war, hawk and dove, soldier or civilian, -- that there is something that transcends our differing political views of the moment. We are all connected by a sense of the common sacrifice represented by the names of those sons and daughters, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, listed on that black wall. While we shall never agree as to the rightness of that conflict, there is a recognition when one looks at that wall-- **so much like a black mirror** -- of a common bond which serves to break down the barriers of difference. What the memorial does is to ask us -- **who are we to erect such barriers between ourselves when God has torn them down** --{especially about the war and those who served there.}

Not far from that black wall stands the Lincoln memorial, and on that Memorial Day trek years ago I had occasion to stop there as well. On its wall is written perhaps the most eloquent statement of reconciliation in the English Language. It is Lincoln's second inaugural address. On that March day in 1865, the Civil War was nearly over. In the North the feelings of loss and pain were great – matched only by the demand for swift and harsh punishment of the South. In reply Lincoln spoke of reconciliation:

With malice toward none, with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see right, Let us strive on to finish the work we are in: to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan; to do all which my achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.

Lincoln so eloquently pointed out that both North and South had suffered great wounds and losses that transcended, as the war drew to a close, the deep differences between them. More importantly, Lincoln reminded all of us that reconciliation can **never** be premised on punishing another, gaining satisfaction, or getting even. Rather, it demands unconditional acceptance; **who are we to erect barriers between us, when God has torn them down.**

One can only think of what might have happened without that shot at Ford's Theater. How our history -- especially on the issue of race-- might have changed if Lincoln's vision of reconciliation, rather than the one of punishment and retribution, had prevailed.

The message of reconciliation is also important for our personal lives. Who among us has not suffered or does not suffer the pain of estrangement from a friend or loved one? We live in a world, which places great strains on relationships. We are all pulled in many directions by the conflicting demands of career and family, by the conflicting roles we are asked to play, and by the conflicting and difficult moral, social, and political issues, which we face. These demands

place strains on each of us, and in turn, on our relationships. The Pauline lesson of reconciliation tells us that we must each remember that as we accept our own imperfections, so must we accept those of our friends and loved ones. Why, because God has. Moreover, if we are to be accepted by others, then we must be accepting. Sounds seductively simple. But it's not. We are challenged not simply to accept another when they are loving, kind and in agreement with us. But to accept another as God has accepted us when they are selfish, insensitive and disagree totally and fundamentally with us. That is not easy – but it is important; for who are we to erect barriers between us when God has torn them down?

How many of you have listened to an orchestra or a musical group before a concert starts? Each talented musician is playing his or her instrument—trying it out, making sure it is properly tuned. Each instrument is producing its unique sounds and tones. Yet, what the orchestra produces is not music, but noise! Why, because there is no acceptance by one instrument of the existence or importance of the others. Each musician is testing his or her own instrument, oblivious to those around her or him. It is not until the strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion are all joined together by a musical score which transcends their individuality and yet permits each to retain its identity, that music is produced.

The reconciliation of two individuals necessary for a successful relationship or friendship is created much like that process of making music. First there is acceptance, and then there is recognition of the transcendent, unifying score. Let there be no doubt, however, that the keeping down, or knocking down, of those self-created barriers is difficult.

Relationships between nations could also benefit from true reconciliation. Too often in the process of trying to break down the barriers that separate nation from nation, one party seeks to change the identity of the other, or to demand wholesale change as a condition of acceptance.

As we have seen, the process of reconciliation requires an awareness of values which transcend our differences and acceptance of those differences, not agreement on them. Of course this process requires that both parties – both nations -- to such an international relationship recognize the transcendent in the other. It can work only if such awareness is not unilateral. The world would be a more peaceful and better place if nations could accept their religious, cultural, political and social differences; and instead focus on their shared responsibility for the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the flowers of the fields, for our global climate, and for the survival of future generations. We have been given dominion over what surrounds us – but unless we recognize that this responsibility transcends our differences, and become as Paul said, “ambassadors of reconciliation”, we will confront in years to come not just a silent spring, but a nuclear winter.

Wordsworth wrote more than 275 years ago: “There is ... {an} inscrutable workmanship that reconciles discordant elements and makes them cling together in one society.” Let us continue to cling together here and elsewhere (especially in our present world) remembering that God has torn those barriers which separate us. Who are we to try to erect them again? {And may we hope that nations learn that security is fleeting but true reconciliation is not.}