

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Mary Margaret Porter
“Do I Have To?”
Psalm 77: 11-15; 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21
2nd Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2016

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 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, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

I thought it might be a nice idea to begin this sermon with a very brief theology lesson, as I had to do a refresh myself before writing it.

The church lexicon around Lent begins to expand to use words such as Atonement - Justification - Sanctification and Reconciliation and I did not really know what they meant until I went to seminary (and still don't completely if I am going to be honest) but I feel it is important to talk about some of these words and what they mean for us – and for our faith.

First atonement - In western Christian theology, Atonement refers to the forgiving or pardoning of sin in general and original sin in particular through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This atonement or pardon enables the reconciliation between God and his creation.

Within Christianity there are, historically, three main theories for how such atonement might work. The one that most reformed theologians have understood and taught is called Penal Substitution or Satisfaction Theory. In this Christ, by his own sacrificial choice, was punished (penalized) in the place of sinners (substitution), thus satisfying the demands of justice so God can justly forgive the sins.

However to fully understand this satisfaction theory it must be entirely grounded on the doctrine of the Trinity. We who believe that Jesus was himself God - the Triune Father, Son and Holy Spirit, believe that God took the punishment upon himself rather than putting it on someone else – i.e. us.

Now Reconciliation. In Christian theology, reconciliation refers to the results of atonement. Reconciliation is the end of the estrangement between God and humanity, caused by original sin and our particular sins. So, to be reconciled to God is to have our relationship with God restored and made right again through the death and resurrection of Christ. It not simply to be forgiven; it is to be forgiven and then made in right full relationship with God.

I am still working on justification and sanctification myself so I will save those for later

I must admit that this sermon began with a disagreement between Robert and myself. As I was re-learning the various theories of atonement in preparation for tackling this scripture, Robert happened

into my office and like good pastors we began to talk about sin. Now neither of us is very well versed in sin so we were speaking hypothetically of course but it soon became apparent that Robert and I had different ideas about sin and how it came to be generally and how it came to each of us particularly. This little 'discussion' went on for some time until I, being the bigger person, simply told Robert that I forgave him. I forgave him for being completely wrong. 😊

I love debate or 'discussion' – it makes me think – it challenges me. I do not like to admit when I am wrong however. Ask my husband. This showed up early in my life when I had an argument with my neighborhood friend. I don't remember the circumstances I just remember my mother telling me I had to walk next door to apologize to her. "Do I have to?" I asked. Yes, you have to, replied my mother.

So I did. I marched over there, rang the doorbell and when my friend appeared at the door I promptly apologized saying "I am so sorry you made me get mad at you." Done.

But seriously my beginning my preparation for this sermon with a theological argument on sin with one of my colleagues who I admire and adore got me to thinking. How does forgiveness and reconciliation work in our daily lives? What does it mean for us here at DCPC to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

There are stories of countless acts of forgiveness on the level I cannot fathom. The parents of a child killed in the Amish school shootings going that very night to the mother of the shooter to forgive and console her – for she too had lost a child.

The victims of apartheid in South Africa holding a years long truth and reconciliation commission whereby those who perpetrated atrocities of hate and racism asked for and received true forgiveness from those they persecuted.

Steven McDonald, a young police officer who was shot by a teenager in New York's Central Park, an incident that left him paralyzed. He said, "I forgave [the shooter] because I believe the only thing worse than receiving a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart."

Or Nadine Collier, the daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance, who was killed in the Charleston church shooting, who said at the hearing of the accused shooter, "You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you."

Most of us hopefully will never have to forgive on this level. Rather our lives of forgiveness are lived in the small everyday moments of our lives – in our family or friend relationships, in our schools, places of work or even here in our church community.

Such is the case for Paul here as he writes to the church in Corinth. Theirs was a relationship marked by mutual respect and caring but their relationship had also been marred by misunderstanding. Hurtful words had been exchanged. Integrity and trust had been questioned on both sides. There was some doubt about whether or not they could ever pick up again and move forward.

Perhaps this describes a relationship you have had – or now have. It may be a friendship, which has been tested over time. It may be with a colleague who has disappointed you or let you down or it may be that family member who always seems to say or do the wrong things, or even here in this church community.

The truth is, as Paul discovered, and as we all know, faith does not protect us from difficulties, particularly in the rocky terrain of relationships. Life together is hard. And we do not always have the strength or wisdom to do the right thing.

Each of us handles conflict differently - some choose to retreat to either nurse their wounds or seethe in their own anger. Some may focus only upon the faults of the other, building up a case against them in their own minds or by gossiping with others. Some seem to never let go, bringing up a past hurt whenever they feel a little dig here and there may exact some kind of slight revenge. And some are adept at verbal sparring and would rather have a knock down drag out conflict right then and there – no matter what.

We see this all around us – we live in a world that seems to thrive on conflict and disagreements and always has - from the Roman gladiators to the US Presidential candidates. We watch television shows that pit women or men against each other for the attention of a potential partner – our magazines, TV shows and online media report on every argument or war of words that stars have with one another, however ridiculous – we cheer when fights break out in the professional sports arena. We may not enjoy conflict when we are in the midst of it – but for some reason it sure makes us feel better to watch others go through it.

Paul was not a stranger to conflict either. In the course of his letters to the Corinthians, we find him at times outraged, and other times defensive, once in a while even sarcastic. He is frustrated. Sometimes his community seems to be doing great and other times he wonders if they have heard one word he has told them. How much easier it would have been for him to just walk away. They had disappointed him one too many times. Enough is enough.

But Paul is not who he used to be. The revelation of Jesus to Paul on the Damascus road has produced a conversion in Paul. He writes of himself when he says “everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.” Seeing the resurrected Lord has changed how Paul sees the world all around him. The old is passing away. The world that Paul thought he knew is not all there is. The new has dawned. God is reconciling God’s creation, and Paul has seen God in action. He cannot go back to life as normal.

This new perspective is possible for Paul and for each of us because God has already worked to reconcile us with God and one another through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And this atonement and reconciliation is not primarily about our individual salvation. God in God’s self abides in a community – the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We were created in the image of God – each one of us – and like God we were made to be in community, to love and care for one another and creation. And being reconciled by God means being brought into this community – this mutual indwelling of love revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And we are appointed to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation. We are agents to bring reconciliation to all spheres of the world. Every day as we go out into the world we are to be ministers of this reconciliation.

So, when faced with this conflict in Corinth, Paul does not simply walk away. Paul forges a harder path – it is the one toward reconciliation.

In the end, he comes to the point where he steps back and says, because we are people of faith, a community bound in God’s reconciling love, because of Jesus, I can no longer regard these people from a human point of view.

We have as our model the One who has shown us what reconciliation really looks like. He writes, “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us.” God is the One who first jumps into the trenches with us, God is the One who comes to us, who perseveres with us, who

refuses to let us go, regardless of how stubborn we are. God puts no conditions upon us; He simply says, here is my gift to you – it is a new start, where everything is changed. Where once we were worlds apart, now we are brought close.

And that is really where reconciliation begins. The Greek root of the word that Paul uses means to change – really, to exchange one thing for another. To change from seeing someone from a human point of view to the view of Christ – fully forgiven, loved and reconciled. It is to exchange estrangement for friendship, to exchange resentment for forgiveness, to exchange the old ways of relating for a brand new way.

And so Paul lives into this promise. In his humanness, he takes this perfect Godly model of reconciliation, and tries to make it his own. In the end, he holds his hurting heart in his hand, and says to the Corinthians, in essence, regardless of what has happened in the past, “there is no restriction in my love and forgiveness for you.”

But don't get me wrong; God did not intend for us to sit around nodding yes and agreeing with each other all the time. God does not imagine that we will stop disagreeing. We are human after all and we are all imperfectly trying to figure out how to live with one another. Our own scripture invites discussion and different points of view as each reads it through his or her own lens. No, disagreement or conflict in and of itself is not wrong. It is through conflict that we learn how to forgive and be forgiven. It is through disagreement and discussion that we discover humility and patience. It is through making mistakes and that we grow and learn. Rather, it is how we deal with conflict that makes us either into Ambassadors of reconciliation or keeps us in the deep dark trenches of our own pride, arrogance and hate.

Paul himself knows he may be hurt again – he knows he may be disappointed - and he will no doubt do the same to them – because, after all, they are all human. But for Paul, the hope of true reconciliation is worth risk of opening up his heart again. He believes that, through Christ, there is always the possibility of something new.

And we stand today at DCPC in a similar position to Paul. We have had our disagreements – we may have been disappointed – we have shared our concerns – and yet we stand together as a new creation – a community full of hope and promise. Through our conciliation process with the Charlotte Presbytery we have identified and gathered together five areas in which we as a community of faith can grow and become stronger – we have established a Resolution Team of dedicated church members who commit to hold each of us accountable for making those things happen – to help us think creatively about how to be the Body of Christ in this place at this time. If we see one another as new creations in Christ – if we live into the promises of God's redeeming love - The possibilities are endless for us!! It is truly an exciting time to be a part of this community of faith- a time of possibility – of hope – of joy!

But living into this type of reconciliation and hope is not accomplished alone – but is only possible together - in community. Even if it means I have to work with Robert – no one - not one of us – can do this alone. We are a BODY – Christ's body – and we need every part – every person - to truly realize God's vision for us in this special place.

God sent his only son to die so that we might live – so that we might live together and love one another. Our resurrection in Christ makes us new creations! And we didn't have to do a thing to earn it – we are just called to carry that message of love, forgiveness and reconciliation out into the world. To become ambassadors of reconciliation. This is where our Lenten theme 'Be Holy' comes in – to be ambassadors of reconciliation in the world – to carry God's message of unending love and compassion and forgiveness to everyone we meet – to see God in the faces of those we disagree – to wake each day reminded that you

are a new creation and so is everyone around you – this is to take a small step to realizing what God means when God calls us to “Be Holy.”

Reconciliation begins and ends with God. It began in Genesis as we were made in the image of God – it was carried forth in the death and resurrection of Christ – in the atonement of our sins - and It is the Holy Spirit who brings it into our lives even today– who opens hearts and recalibrates friendships, and recommits families, reunites brothers and sisters in faith and allows us to forgive – to be reconciled – to see one another as God sees us – forgiven – reconciled and loved unconditionally. Our part is simple.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his seminal book “Life Together” notes, “Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by and in Christ in which we may participate.”

Do we have to? No – God in Christ already did. We need only to see it, and then join in.

Amen.