

“Reconciliation”

Jeremiah 17:5-8; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21;
Matthew 5:21-26

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In the Children’s Sermon this morning, Claire gave us a pretty good entry into this season that we have entered into—the season of Lent. I liked the imagery of realizing that it’s not a season of Lint, but a season of Lent. Although it is a season when we think about what we need to throw away in our lives. We do stop and take a moment to look at what’s going on in our lives. It’s modeled after the 40 days when Jesus went into the wilderness and was tempted. It’s that time when Jesus goes through a struggle, looking at his own life and struggling with what it is about and the ways he might lead it.

Not long ago, we went through the season of Christmas where we have an incredible moment of joy, realizing that God is sending God’s son to be among us. The Prince of Peace has come. God with us. We have that moment of wonder and joy. If you can remember a moment in your life—I sometimes think of it as a conversion moment—when we really realize the love of God for us in Jesus Christ, there’s that wonder that comes and that leads us into life. We want to lead a changed life.

Then we go into what’s called Ordinary Time in the church year, where we are trying to live our lives as disciples of Christ. What often happens, particularly in that first phase, when we have come through this elation of knowing God’s love and then begin to try to live according to that, we enter into a time when we realize that it’s not quite so easy. We recognize that even though Christ has come, we still struggle with life.

Jesus had a moment of what we might call ordinary time between the time he was at the temple and the time his ministry started. As he began his ministry, he went into the desert and was confronted by the temptations that were there. So Lent is the time when we think about what’s going on in our own lives and how we run up against the struggles of life. Oftentimes we think about it as a time where we are introspective. We think about how it’s going in our own lives.

This year I want to invite us to think not only personally introspectively, but communally introspectively because oftentimes when Jesus is talking to those who are listening, he is talking to them as a group. Paul is writing to church communities and inviting them to live together in a particular way. So as we go into this particular season, I want to think not only personally, but communally about what it means to reflect on who we are and how it’s going and what we’re struggling with.

I think we all know that life is not always easy. We run up against struggles. Sometimes it starts early on. I can remember when I was a young boy, around 10 years old, I was invited to stay with a friend. I was pretty excited about that. He was a pretty popular guy so I was happy to stay the night. We talked, and I thought we had a great time. The next morning on the bus to school, I found him telling stories and sharing what I

thought were confidential things. I remember thinking, as a young boy of about 10, "I'll never trust anybody again."

We know those moments when we come up against a brokenness, and we have to then live with that brokenness in our lives. I think for me that's one of those things that I have had to struggle with throughout my life, even though I realize that not everybody is like that. So as we continue to live our lives and go through Lent, we begin to think about those moments of brokenness in our own lives and in the lives we share with others. One reason I tell that story is the brokenness was between he and I. It broke a relationship of trust. Then we have to live forward from that, and how do we do that?

The brokenness in our lives is fairly evident. I don't think God would have given us the Ten Commandments if there wasn't a certain amount of brokenness. There's an interesting piece to the commandments. As you go through them, it talks about don't murder, don't steal—pretty straightforward—and then it says don't covet. It's interesting that is the very last one because in some ways it's almost like God is saying, "Here are some things that happen because you do this last one. I can't give you a list of everything you do, but I can give you the motivation." Some would say that what God has done in that last commandment is to point out part of our motivation to do things that break relationships. We want what the other has, or we want to be better and get into a rivalry with another. Even the fall itself, in some ways, fits this motivation. Think about what it was about. We wanted to have the knowledge of God. We wanted to be as good as or better than God. There's a sense of rivalry that takes place, or a desire to have what the other has. It may not be the only motivation, but it certainly is a central one.

Look at the world around us. What happens out of our motivations to want others to be the way we want them to be, or to want their stuff, or to want to be in control. We can look around the world today and see wars going on because of the conflict we have, the break we have between people. It's been going on from time immemorial, I guess. And yet, it feels that Christ steps into our brokenness and invites us to be different. I want to tell a story about one person who felt this calling.

It was just before the beginning of World War II. He felt a calling to somehow bring a wholeness, a sense of community, a reconciliation to people. He had been through seminary and felt that that was a central piece to his life. So he went looking for a place where he could begin to live this out. He found a little place right near the demarcation line between Germany and France. He was welcomed into the small French community, bought a little dilapidated house there, and began to fix it up and live there. He began to provide shelter to Jews escaping Germany. His family lived in Switzerland, and on one trip back he ended up needing to stay in Switzerland because if he returned to France he would have been arrested when Germany swept through.

After the war, he went back and felt an even stronger calling to create a community in which the divisions weren't so evident, but the love of God was what was present in that community. He started by himself. In fact his first writing on community was when he

was living by himself. Soon he had four or five others, and they kept building a Protestant Monastic Community. They found that young people were interested in what they were doing and how they tried to show the love of God in the way they lived in the sharing of a communal place.

Some of you might know by now that I'm talking about a guy named Brother Roger, who started the community of Taizé in the Burgundy region of France, through his focus on being the Body of Christ and his concern for the very verse we read out of Corinthians—that Christ is in the process of reconciling us to God and we have been given a ministry of reconciliation. He created a community that now has thousands of young people come every summer, and every New Years has a meeting in one of the communities in Europe that attracts 40,000 young people to participate. It's also one of the communities I'm planning to visit on my sabbatical.

I look at Brother Roger's life and what he has done and the way he's tried to make his community a parable of community, a place where the divisions are not done away with, but we live with the tensions knowing that the One that calls us together is one. It is in Christ that we are reconciled to God and we are invited to reconcile with one another. Taizé is one community where they are living with a focus on reconciliation and I hope to find out more about it.

I want to think a little bit about what it means to be reconciled. In a community, we are all connected. We can think about what happens to cause the need for reconciliation. There's a brokenness. It's as if one of the cords that connects us has been cut. There is some way a relationship has been broken. The very word in Greek for reconciliation really means that something has happened in a relationship to make it become hostile. You had a friendship and somehow that friendship has been broken. Somehow the idea of reconciliation is actually taking a positive step to actually put some energy into healing that relationship, to put it back together. So when we hear about Jesus saying we are being reconciled through him to God, there's something about how he's putting us back together with God. He is helping us recognize the love of God that comes to do that reconciliation, to bring us together, and then he invites us to be part of the process of doing that with one another.

Now, some things are fairly easy to get over and you can probably do it easily. But sometimes it's more difficult. If I cut a piece of rope, how would I get it to reattach? I might be able to tie a knot, but if I really wanted it to be completely healed it would be almost impossible for me to do it. I think it is there that we're dependent on the work of Christ. We can't do it alone. It is through the love of God in Jesus Christ that allows any kind of reconciliation to be fully what it can be. It is through his help and guidance.

Lent is a time when we can think about our own lives, think about how there's a certain brokenness to our own lives with God that on my own I can't really heal. It takes God's work to come to invite me, us, to be in his family. It's God's work of reconciliation in Jesus Christ that allows us to be a community of faith. We can also think about what it

means to be reconciled to one another. To think about those places in our own lives where I know there's a brokenness that needs to be healed.

Reconciliation is dependent on our faith, our relationship with Christ, and our willingness to allow God to work in us and through us. There are two things I think that help us in doing that. One is we can pray. We can pray about those issues in our lives, those places of brokenness, asking for direction and help and then participating in that work. I think it's interesting that Jesus is talking to his disciples and Paul is writing his letter to a community because I think the second thing that helps us is that we can find reconciliation easier when we are in community. There are ways that community helps us see when we need to be reconciled. It's easy for me to deny or ignore those places in my life where I know that reconciliation is needed. Community can help me see that. It can also support me and give me help, encourage me to do what I need to do. Sometimes community can actually bring me together with those in my life whom I need to be reconciled to. It certainly is the idea that our community brings us together with God. It's part of the way Jesus has invited us to work out that reconciliation.

So as we go on through Lent, one of the ways we might think about Lent is to stop, look, and listen for places of relational brokenness, places where I still feel broken with God, and allow God to work in me, take those places to God, open my life to God in that way and allow God to show me where I might open myself to the reconciliation he would bring with others and how I might participate in it.

It's very easy to talk about something like reconciliation. I think what's really hard is to do it. God has come to us and we know that God goes with us. God has come in Jesus Christ to reconcile us to God, and God goes with us through the love of Christ and the Holy Spirit to work out reconciliation among us. He's given us the ministry of reconciliation. Amen.

Let's pray:

Lord, we can all think of places in our lives where relationships have broken. We have had struggles with how we get along together. We recognize there are things we have done or ways that we are that we're not sure you like. We worry they will break our relationship with you. Help us see how you are coming to us, bringing reconciliation to us, offering to make us new, to guide us on a path into your kingdom. Help us, as we follow Jesus, see the ways you invite us to reconcile with those around us, to make those relationships be right and good to the best of our abilities and through the work you do in us through the Holy Spirit. Lord, lead us. Let us know both Jesus' ministry of reconciliation to us and the ministry of reconciliation you have given us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.