

Reconciliation

I hope you won't mind if I dip into the well of memory for one more Sunday morning and take as the inspiration for our time of studying the Word together my recollections of my experiences on Sabbatical this summer. This will be the last time that I ask for your indulgence in this way, at least for quite a while. Next week's readings in the Revised Common Lectionary give me an excellent excuse to revive my occasional series on "Uppity Women of the Bible," an opportunity I just can't pass up. The following week marks the celebration for many Christians of Christ the King Sunday and our worship will highlight that theme as well. And then, suddenly, it will be Advent again. I've not completed my Advent planning yet but I'm thinking of something a little different this year that I hope you will enjoy.

So today I want to look back again at the visit Connie and I made to Coventry Cathedral and specifically at the theme of reconciliation which is so much a part of the spirit of Coventry. We'll share again some of the pictures we took, some of which we've shown previously in Sunday School, and trace some key concepts through the Scriptures. But I want to start in the same place we started our service this morning – the place where humans throughout time have found themselves – asking God for help for "us" and deliverance from "them."

"Us and Them" – When I was a teenager, one of the hottest rock albums around was "The Dark Side of the Moon" by the English progressive rock group, Pink Floyd. In fact, the album was so hot, it stayed in the pop charts for 741 weeks from 1973 to 1988, longer than any other album in history. It was also critically acclaimed and is regarded by many as one of the most important rock albums in the history of that genre. I bring this up because one of the most recognizable songs on the album is entitled "Us and Them." It is a lament over the seemingly universal experience of human divisions, us against them, country against country, rich against poor. "Us and them," begin the sad, slow lyrics, "and after all we're only ordinary men."

If you've any doubt about the universality of this experience of humankind being set one against the other, you need only look to the Bible. In the deeply symbolic stories of the early chapters of Genesis, we have this friction from almost the beginning of human experience. Adam blames his misdeeds on his wife, Cain murders Abel, Lamech kills a man for wounding him. Over and over again we encounter the stories of one human being in conflict with another, then tribe against tribe and nation against nation. Before long, the combatants are calling upon God to help them against their foes.

Such sentiments are especially common in the Psalms, the hymn book of the Temple in Jerusalem. I'm sure that most of you have noticed that we almost invariably use a Psalm or part of a Psalm as all or part of our Call to Worship on Sundays, in keeping with ancient Church tradition. You may not be aware that I've been attempting to slowly work us through the entire body of the Psalms, even the ones not in the lectionary. Some are harder to use than others, especially those which are mainly concerned with calling down God's wrath on somebody else. I've only rarely used any of these so-called "Imprecatory Psalms" and only for specific effect. I hope you were made at least a little uncomfortable by the lines in today's Call to Worship that asked God to "put to shame and confusion" or to "(turn) back and (bring) to dishonor" those who oppose us. We are no longer comfortable with the idea that God punishes, not even that God should strike our enemies, and I think that overall that's a good thing. But from time to time we need to acknowledge that these vengeful impulses are still a part of our fallen nature. If we do

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not acknowledge our temptations toward revenge and bitterness, then we cannot be on guard against them and they may overwhelm us when we have been weakened by the onslaughts of trouble. An occasional reading of the imprecatory Psalms, the Psalms of curse, serves to remind us that, in the words of Pink Floyd, “after all, we’re only ordinary men.” Writing for the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Derek Kidner says about the Psalms of Imprecation, “If these passages in the psalms open our eyes to the depths and just deserts of evil, and to the dangers of borrowing its weapons, they have done their work. To say that theirs is not the last word on the subject is no reproach: more work first needed to be done. That work and final word belonged to Christ, and we are its inheritors.”

We are called by Christ and by the apostles who first took up the mission of Jesus to renounce vengeance and to grant and to receive forgiveness. That is why we moved this morning from Psalm 70 to “God, who touches earth with beauty, make my heart anew... Turn my dreams to noble action, ministries of love.” By the way, does anybody besides me still want to sing that first line, “God who touches earth with beauty, make me lovely, too”? Some changes to old hymns just don’t make sense to me. But whether we are asking God to remake our hearts or to make us lovely in the sense of being models of Christian love, part of that newness of life is to set aside grudges, hatreds and antipathies of all kinds in order to witness to the world God’s call to reconciliation.

One of the great witnesses of our time to reconciliation and peace has been the Cathedral of St. Michael in Coventry. Built in the late 14th and early 15th centuries as the largest parish church in England, the beautiful Gothic edifice was granted cathedral status in 1918. Just 22 years later, the cathedral was nearly destroyed by the German incendiary bombardment of Coventry, a leading industrial center, on November 14, 1940. Only the outer walls [SLIDE], the tower and spire [SLIDE], and the tomb of the first Bishop of Coventry survived. According to the cathedral’s website: “The decision to rebuild the cathedral was taken the morning after its destruction. Rebuilding would not be an act of defiance, but rather a sign of faith, trust and hope for the future of the world. It was the vision of the Provost at the time, Dick Howard, which led the people of Coventry away from feelings of bitterness and hatred.”

As plans progressed to rebuild the cathedral, the decision was made to retain the ruins of the Gothic structure as a living part of the cathedral, still hallowed ground, a place of prayer especially for reconciliation. As one enters the cathedral, [SLIDE] one’s eye is still drawn to the east end, where the high altar would have originally been. Now the area features a rough wooden cross, a replica of one erected on the day after the fire in 1940. The cathedral’s stonemason, Jock Forbes, had found that two charred roof beams had fallen together to form a cross, lashed them together and set them up at the site of the altar. Provost Howard had the words [SLIDE] “Father Forgive,” an echo of Christ’s words from the cross, engraved in the wall behind the cross. This place is now the daily site of prayers for reconciliation, [SLIDE] which include the litany which we will take up in a few minutes. Among the many works of modern art that have come to reside amidst the ruins is one of a pair of statues titled “Reconciliation” by Josefina de Vasconcellos [SLIDE]. The twin to this piece stands in the Peace Garden in Hiroshima.

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One of the truly moving moments of our visit for me was to stand near the altar of reconciliation and hear a cathedral volunteer patiently explaining to a group of small children the concept of reconciliation [SLIDE]. I hope I did half as good a job as she did when I talked to our little ones this morning. In the years since 1940, the Cathedral of St. Michael has become the home for International Centre for Reconciliation and the International Network of Communities of the Cross of Nails. These groups work locally in reconciling churches and community groups but also internationally (predominantly in the Middle East and central Africa) working with terrorists and dictators as well as local churches, tribes and gangs. Internationally, 160 Cross of Nails Centers share a common commitment to work and pray for peace, justice and reconciliation.

In this emphasis on restoring loving relationships, the laity and clergy of the Cathedral of St. Michael, along with their partners in the Communities of the Cross of Nails, stand in holy continuity with the calling of Jesus and, indeed, with the Spirit of God stretching back to earliest days of the story of redemption. We are all likely to remember the story of Jacob and Esau that begins in the 25th chapter of Genesis: “And the Lord said to (Rebekah), “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.” When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob.” Jacob the heel-grasper manages when the twins are young men to supplant his brother as heir through a stratagem taking advantage of his brother’s hunger after a hard day and another taking advantage of their father’s blindness. When Esau realizes what has happened, he threatens to kill his brother and Jacob flees to the home of their uncle Laban, where he marries Laban’s two daughters and, returning sly trick for sly trick, manages to walk off with the better part of Laban’s flocks. But God intervenes in many ways in Jacob’s life, renaming him Israel and sending him on a much-feared encounter with his brother. In Genesis 33, we read of the moment that Jacob so dreaded: “Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.”

Even if you’d forgotten the end of the Jacob and Esau story, it should sound familiar to you. In describing the reconciliation available for all with God, Jesus told a well-loved story about a father with two sons. The younger demanded his share of the property and went off to a far land, squandering his inheritance in riotous living. Destitute and ashamed, he prepared to return home to beg for a servant’s position. “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” It is this same spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation that moved Jesus to offer a prayer for those who mistreated him, even as they began the process of his execution: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” This, of course, was the inspiration for the words engraved on the east wall at Coventry.

In writing his second surviving letter to the Christians in Corinth, the apostle Paul made his own attempt at expressing the loving overtures of God towards humankind and the loving response

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we are called to make to God and to our neighbors: “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.”

As agents of reconciliation, we take up the song “Let There Be Peace on Earth,” which I first learned in elementary school, although it was certainly inspired by Christian faith. Or perhaps we turn to the far older words attributed to St. Francis:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.*

Part of being agents of reconciliation is, as I said earlier, to recognize the impulses in our own lives which lead away from peace and to work against them with God’s help. As the famous work of Bishop Desmond Tutu and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa proved, there must be truth, disclosure, before there can be forgiveness and reconciliation. In fulfilling the promise of reconciliation with God and our neighbors, we must first confess where we have gone wrong in thought, word and deed. That’s why the Litany of Reconciliation practiced each day at Coventry is written as it is. We must recognize the roots of strife before strife can be overcome. Let’s join in that prayer now together, speaking together the words in italics.

I hope you recognized the ending of the litany from the passage in Ephesians I read earlier. As I said last week, now that we know that we have been forgiven, that we are justified in God’s eyes, we are free to understand the admonition from Paul, titled in our pew Bibles as “Rules for the New Life,” not as requirements for God’s love but rather as our loving response to the love of God which comes to us freely. To be agents of reconciliation, instruments of peace, we must act in loving ways toward each other, being kind and forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven us. We must lay down all the sorry things within us, all the things we have done that we ought not to have done and take up all the things we ought to have done that we left undone. We must, in a good old fashioned Biblical word, repent; that is, we must turn away from brokenness and toward the wholeness that God has always intended for us.

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In our age-old Christian tradition, we have a symbol of that that turning from brokenness to wholeness. We remember that Christ Jesus gave himself for us, that he was broken so that we might be made whole. By his stripes are we healed. And so, my sisters and brothers, I invite you once again to the Table of the Lord, to celebrate God's love that reconciles us with God and with our neighbors. Let us remember together what we must lay down in order that we may accept God's gift of love and life and what Christ, in love, laid down for us. Amen.