

Lenten Sermons: "The Promises of Easter"
Week Three: "The Promise of Reconciliation"
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2 Corinthians 5.16-21

16 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. 17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 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. 20 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. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

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I'm just as guilty as anyone for letting the basic principle of this table stay here in the sanctuary and hidden in my life. You see this table isn't about a bunch of mumbo jumbo. This table is about life and the fact that we come back to this table means we believe in the ministry of reconciliation.

When I was in high school, there was a petty spat between me and my best friend at the time. It was painful as most any fight at that age is. It was over a mutual love interest and we didn't talk. It was our senior year and we figured we'd never speak. But, the next thing we knew we were at the same university, West Texas State University in Canyon, TX. I was in the band, he was on the football team and we passed each other every Saturday night as they exited the field and we entered. I thought, I can handle that. Then we ended up in the same science lab. Then passed regularly in the hallways. It was painful.

Years went by. I left for seminary. Then facebook happened. Facebook can really be a bad thing at times and I really can't say that I recommend it for everyone. But we bumped into each other again through mutual friends and our 20 year class reunion was coming up. We were both popular among our many many mutual friends. I made the decision to reach out because 15 years later it seemed this was just going to affect both our circles if I didn't. And so we reconnected and what started out awkward quickly became laughter and within just a few minutes we were laughing at our silly, petty youth. It took me 15 years to realize that reconciliation was possible and worth it. Of course our friendship isn't the same. We're adults now with different life paths but we are able to honor our past and it has freed us for wonderful futures.

The past can trap us and what this passage today is all about is helping us move ahead. Grudges, jealous, anger, revenge, all these things develop when we do not move toward reconciliation. And, if we never get there these things can eat us live.

In the PCUSA we have 11 theological institutions but there are two others we also have relation to by tradition and they are Union Theological Seminary in New York and Fuller Seminary in Pasadena California. Richard Mouw the President of Fuller and Don Shriver the former president of Union, have both written on this subject of forgiveness. Dr. Mouw's book Forgive and Forget looks at how ultimate we have to let go of those grudges we have and Dr. Shriver deals with the complex issues of times when truly social justice is at stake. Dr. Shriver suggests that sometimes forgiveness can come too soon. In times such as systemic abuse and manipulation, going back to a relationship pretending nothing happened could leave to a continuing abuse cycle.

Both are right. Allowing those things to remain inside of us and eat us up, will have consequences on our physical health, our mental health, and all our other relationships. And, forgetting to the point that we just allow ourselves back into a system of abuse is dangerous.

But here's what we know in Christ. If a human won't forgive us, Christ does. If we are able to be reconciled to him, why not to everyone? And if we are reconciled to our God, our God expects us in return to not hold onto those separations we create....for our own health and good.

C.S. Lewis, one of the most influential Christian authors in the last century, recounted his continual attempts to forgive someone who had been cruel to him. He prayed for the man, at first for no other reason than because Jesus told him to. But then, he writes to a friend:

Last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered - or felt as if I did - that I had really forgiven someone I have been trying to forgive for over thirty years. Trying and praying that I might. When the thing actually happened - sudden as the longed-for cessation of one's neighbor's radio - my feeling was, "But it's so easy. Why didn't you do it ages ago?" So many things are done easily the moment you can do them at all. But till then, simply impossible, like learning to swim. There are months during which no efforts will keep you up; then comes the day and hour and minute after which, and ever after, it becomes impossible to sink.

Lewis then makes it clear that his ability to forgive was quite unlike learning to swim in this respect: it was not of his own doing. He reflected, "a discord has been resolved and it is certainly the great Resolver who has done it."

This table exists for a reason. It exists because we need it. It is a visible sign that we are going to have occasions when we are broken as a community of faith. It's a fact of life. If that weren't so, this sacrament would not be necessary. We need to be reminded that we can come together again. In fact, scripture says if we aren't able to come together, we really shouldn't come up here. We need to be willing to not let the past eat us up anymore. This table is a new start for ourselves as community and ourselves as individuals.

Last month I mentioned that Jesus was at table with his disciples, even Judas. You can look at all the gospel accounts and you will find it is true. Jesus knew who was to betray him, invited him to share in the Passover feast, and most likely shared the last supper with him. That is our example. That is our way as Christians but all of Christendom for 2,000 years has been trying to fence this table as if God and Jesus needed protecting and for 2,000 years the imprint of what we are supposed to do is right there in the inclusion of Judas in the invitation.

Why? Because no one is excluded from this ministry of reconciliation. No one. Our exclusive tendencies at this table says everything about us but the Lord's invitation and intention to serve all says everything about him. This table is radically inclusive. Everyone is welcome to gather around this table and all who trust in Jesus are invited to show that intention here.

This is why this table is on the floor and not up against the back wall as it is in more exclusive settings. No matter who you are and what your relationship with God, you come in here and sit around this table and the invitation is given.

I will say this though. Don't come if you don't intend to be changed. Don't come if you don't intend to be reconciled with God and one another.

Because once you understand what this is about and you receive what is offered here, you cannot help but be changed. As Presbyterians we do not believe this is just a symbol. We do not believe magic happens here either. We believe instead that our Lord becomes spiritually real in this sacrament.

I'm aware that every church has fusses and fights. I'm aware that you are a church. We have this table to come back together and it will be here every month calling you to greater forgiveness, greater unity, greater peace.

Maybe today you side more with Dr. Shriver that today forgiveness comes too soon. Or maybe you are like Dr. Mouw and you believe it is time to let that weight you've been carrying against your neighbor go. Either way, this table is here for you. If not today, it is here again on Maundy Thursday. Either way, make a decision now to journey toward freedom from holding onto the difficulties of the past.