

“The Ministry of Reconciliation”

Based on 2 Cor. 5:16-21

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Conflict is a part of life. Wherever you find community you are bound to find conflict. Maybe a few people enjoy conflict but most of us would much rather avoid conflict. Sometimes we do everything possible to avoid it. We give in quickly. We deny there is conflict. We agree with everyone and then undermine the decision. At the first sign of conflict we walk away. There are a lot of different ways we are tempted to avoid conflict. But the truth is conflict cannot always be avoided. Nor should it be.

Conflict actually is a great opportunity to strengthen relationships and clarify values. Having recently experienced conflict, I can testify that my relationships have been strengthened with some of the folks involved in the conflict, although, I have to admit that some other relationships took a hit. Conflict is messy and the potential for hurt and even irreparable harm to relationships is there. The other thing I was reminded of in this conflict I found myself in was that conflict forces us to examine our motives and values. In this conflict I was dealing with, as the conversation went back and forth, it became clearer what was motivating us, what we valued, and what our bottom lines were. Those motivations and values had always been there, but the conflict brought them to the surface for everyone to see. And that was a good thing because the cards are all out on the table, so to speak. Going forward, this group I'm a part of that went through this conflict can move with more clarity. Now that it's all out there, changes are going to be necessary to move forward. It's painful. But it will probably be better in the long run. Conflict is messy and painful. People get hurt and relationships can be damaged. But it has the potential to strengthen relationships and clarify values, which is a good thing.

And then sometimes conflict reveals irreconcilable differences. You talk, debate, reflect and argue long enough and it becomes evident that the differences are too great. Finding a way to reconcile and move

forward together appears to not be possible. That can be a good thing. Trying to keep relationships together that are at cross-purposes is exhausting and is probably not the best use of energy. Especially because when we try to keep these relationships together, the tendency is to use the same methods as we use to avoid conflict: deny the problem exists, paper it over, undermine each other, give in while knowing you aren't being true to yourself. So when it becomes obvious that the differences are so great and profound that you can't get past the conflict and move forward together, then it is for the best to separate. And so divorces happen, business partners go their separate ways, board members resign...and denominations split.

So we turn our attention to the scripture reading this morning from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. He tells us that those of us who identify as Christians are ambassadors of Christ who have been given the ministry of reconciliation. Just by being human we want to be about the work of reconciliation. We want to be able to get along with others, to work through our disagreements and find ways to move forward together with our relationships intact. But for us as Christians working for reconciliation is central to what it means to be Christian. So that means we have a real responsibility to do the hard work of revealing motives and clarifying values, working things out and finding ways to get through the conflict to reconciliation. True reconciliation and not just a papered over truce or strained tolerance. It's hard work we are called to and we are not always successful. But if we are ambassadors for Christ, what else would we be doing? I can't imagine an ambassador for Jesus wanting to do anything else but mend broken relationships.

But maybe the reconciliation that Paul is talking about is not the reconciliation among people who have differences but a different reconciliation. Maybe our ministry is not about reconciling people to each other but about reconciling people with God. After all, that's the reconciliation that Paul was talking about, how God, through Christ, is reconciling the world to Godself. Let's take a quick look at how Paul describes God's reconciling work.

First of all, this is how reconciliation typically works. Since Paul also talks about ambassadors, let's say the conflict is between two

nations who are at war with each other. To make peace and bring the two nations together, ambassadors who represent the warring nations get together to talk out the differences, to name what is happening, and try to find ways to end the fighting. Both sides have to reckon the damage that has been inflicted and find ways to make restitution so that things can be made right. Once that is all worked out, a peace agreement can be set up and signed. The warring nations eventually are able to reconcile and move forward.

But when it comes to the situation between us and God, there is damage done on both sides but the perpetrators of the harm come from one side: us. God is totally innocent of the harm. If we were going to work out restitution between us and God, only God would be in the position to make demands. So what does God do? According to Paul, God offers blanket amnesty. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God determines that the harm that has been done through our sin is cared for. God declares that God has reconciled us to Godself. It's done. By the sheer grace of God we are forgiven and restored to relationship with God. All that is left for us to do is to acknowledge what God has already done for us, to live our lives as if we are reconciled with God because, through Christ, we already are. To remain in a broken relationship with God is to reject what God has already done for us. Paul is saying that God has reconciled us to God, so live that way, and be thankful! Rejoice!

So how do we exercise our ministry of reconciliation? What reconciliation are we talking about? It seems clear that since we are ambassadors of Jesus, that our role is to declare that God has reconciled others to Godself. In other words, we announce the good news that our sins are forgiven and that because of Jesus every person is *already* reconciled with God. There is nothing else to do but to acknowledge with gratitude that the division between us and God has been bridged by Jesus. That's the ministry of reconciliation that Paul is talking about. So is that all there is to it? Just announce the good news and that's it? It seems to me that real reconciliation takes more than just saying it's so. There has to be a mending of relationship and a change of behavior that

demonstrates actual reconciliation. Otherwise, it's just words. God has done all that God can do. What will we do in response?

For us especially we have to be about the work of making reconciliation more than just words. Not only do we have the ministry of reconciliation, we identify as a reconciling congregation. That's our aspiration. The following statement comes from the reconciling ministries network web site around the topic of reconciliation:

Reconciling Ministries Network is committed to reconciliation that leads to the healing and transformation of animosity into honest relationships that respect all God's children. Reconciliation is a profound ongoing individual and collective commitment from all those affected to establishing new relationships embedded in mutual recognition.

Authentic reconciliation requires the naming and the speaking of truth to create relationships and communities grounded in peace with justice.

They go on to say: Reconciling Ministries Network acts in hospitality across theological divides and is committed to the creation of community, interconnectedness, and deep relationships.

These are lofty aspirations. They go much further than simply saying, "God loves you" and "you are forgiven." This is difficult work that we are called to. And, in fact, it's a lifelong struggle.

And when I think about where we currently are as a United Methodist Church, it seems ever likely that efforts of reconciliation will fail and the church will separate over irreconcilable differences. I am aware that there are people who are even now working out some sort of a plan of separation that would be offered at the next General Conference, which will take place next May. What will happen and how that will affect us remains to be seen.

Nevertheless, our ministry continues to be one of reconciliation, no matter what. Our task and joy is to let people know that they are loved and forgiven by God. There is not anything they have done that will keep God from loving them and forgiving them. God's love and capacity to forgive is without limit. And what is true for others is true for you and me. God loves you, no matter what. And anything you have done that offends God, God forgives. This is the gospel. Praise God! The question remains: what is our response to the gospel?

There is a Jewish concept called Tikkun Olam. It means “to mend the world.” We all know the world is broken, relationships are strained and fractured, much healing needs to be done. God’s desire certainly is that the world would be healed. You and I get to play a role in that process of healing. And the ministry of reconciliation is part of that process. It’s a messy and frustrating process that can take much longer than any of us would like. In fact, in some ways the process of healing the world never ends. So there is work for us to do, to be ambassadors of Christ, to exercise our ministry of reconciliation, to do our part to mend the world, one small act at a time.