

Jesus the supreme reconciler.

Colossians 1:21-23 (esp. 21-23)

Over a year ago we took a look at Palmer Becker's book, *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten Signs of a Unique Christian Faith*. And we also studied his three core values statements. Jesus is the centre of our faith. Community is the centre of our life. Reconciliation is the centre of our work. Today our main scripture focus is reminding ourselves about reconciliation.

In her book *Family Ministry*, Diana Garland relates the following story by R.L. Honeycutt on the origin of the Irish expression "Chancing one's arm." In St. Patrick's cathedral in Dublin hangs an ancient door with a rough hewn, rectangular opening hacked in the center. The story of this "door of reconciliation" and the related Irish expression of "chancing one's arm" are remarkable and instructive.

In 1492, two prominent Irish families, the Ormond's and Kildare's, were in the midst of a bitter feud. Besieged by Gerald Fitzgerald, Earl of Kildare, Sir James Butler, Earl of Ormond, and his followers took refuge in the chapter house of St. Patrick's cathedral, bolting themselves in. As the siege wore on, the Earl of Kildare concluded the feuding was foolish. Here were two families worshipping the same God, in the same church, living in the same country, trying to kill each other. So he called out to Sir James and, as an inscription in St. Patrick's says today, "undertake on his honour that he should receive no villanie."

Afraid of "some further treachery," Ormond did not respond. So Kildare seized his spear, cut a hole in the door, and thrust his hand through. It was grasped by another hand inside the church. The door was opened and the two men embraced, thus ending the family's feud.

Notice, it was Kildare on the outside, who had more options in the situation, risking his arm, to make peace. From this noble gesture comes the expression "chancing one's arm." This story needs to be told & retold in Ireland today,

as their history, politics and resistance to real reconciliation, are driving them toward disaster.

This is a wonderful story, "chancing one's arm." But it's only the beginning of reconciliation. It would be good to know how the two families got along after this event. Did they get back to the same relationship they had before this conflict? Did they become better friends?

In his book *Hope for Rwanda*, Father Andre Sibomana notes how hard it was in the aftermath of genocide to bring the Hutu and Tutsi tribes together to talk about, even less agree on, the history of Rwanda. Remember how they went after each other in the genocide of 100 days in 1994? Around 800,000 people were slaughtered; especially Tutsi's by ethnic Hutu extremists. The sad part is the French and the world chose not to intervene. And the really sad part is so many Hutu's and Tutsi's were Christians. Even church leaders were convicted of killing people, some who sought shelter and safety in churches.

After that mad frenzy, Father Andre Sibomana tells of an incident in which he mobilized the people of his parish for the communal work of reconstruction. They needed to build every thing from scratch: gardens, houses, and pit latrines. During a break from the work, the priest was amazed to see Hutu & Tutsi workers drinking banana beer from the same cup.

Sibomana's experience reminds us, a church interrupted by God's new creation doesn't assume an otherworldly posture. Instead, it finds itself deeply engaged in mundane, every day, routine realities. Too often, even in the church, we tend to view reconciliation as a spiritual event or a shallow sentiment that involves merely hugs and handshakes. But we see a different reality when people go beyond forgiveness. Reconciliation is about killers and their victims' family members taking a break from their common work to drink banana beer from the same cup, as they are rebuilding the community together. It's about people letting go of deep hurts so they can be on a church committee, without messing up the church.

One of my pastoral experiences still haunts me. I wonder how I could have managed myself better and been more helpful. All of a sudden a family showed up at church. No one knew them. They attended for a few Sundays. Then we had a guest speaker who talked about peace. Suddenly, I didn't see the family in church. So after missing two Sundays I went for a visit. The reception at its most generous would be described as frosty. But I did manage to have a conversation in their yard. It turned out the man's mother had been murdered. The guilty party was up for parole. So they were mad about the message of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation. It's not just a story or a theory. It was real. And they were not ready to forgive.

I expressed my deepest sympathies but was stuck as to what more to say and do. I did not preach to them about forgiveness. I did think the Holy Spirit led them to us to hear this message at that specific time. I was not sure how persistent I should be in visiting. I feared causing further spiritual harm. So I don't know what happened with the parole hearing. Did the family ever forgive? I prayed for them often & hoped they would find a way toward reconciliation. It's easy to talk about forgiveness and reconciliation, but it's often really difficult to do or help others do so. Reconciliation is a life giving message until we have to do it. But when we do so, life changes for the better.

Often, the Christian faith can be confounding to the world. Enemies can become friends, even to the point of caring for and protecting each other. In the small African country of Burundi, one leader, a university professor, brings two tribes together in a practical way.

Emmanuel Ndikumana is a Hutu married to a Tutsi in Burundi, another African country, north of Rwanda. As a leader at the university in Bujumbura, he constantly finds himself caught between the Burundi military, dominated by the Tutsi tribe, and the predominantly Hutu tribe rebel groups who are fighting the government. But he knows that small things make a difference in the everyday lives of

people, so he has formed groups of Hutu and Tutsi students who travel together.

When they come to a military checkpoint, the Tutsi students talk with the soldiers. When they come to a rebel roadblock, Hutu students do the talking while the rest of the students carry on with their own conversations. This way, they are able to confuse both the military and rebel fighters. The Christian vision of hope never disconnects the question of whether we can reconcile the nations, from whether we can live in peace and forgiveness with those nearest to us - in our homes, at work, and in worship. (From *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* by Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice)

One last thought before we dive into our three verses for today. In our familiarity with the idea of forgiveness, reconciliation and all that goes with it, **I think we tend to forget or ignore lament.** Too often, revenge and / or hopelessness replaces lament. At its core, despite its life giving qualities, we are uncomfortable with actually doing the hard work of reconciliation, so we rush past lament.

But reconciliation is grounded in lament. Major portions of the Bible are lament – mourning, grieving, weeping, and crying out, especially to God. Too often we expect people to not express their feelings and to “get over it,” what ever that is. I remember being appalled years ago, when several Texas men, beat a gay man, tied him to a truck, and dragged him to death.

But what disturbed me even more was, as soon as this became news, a group in Washington State marched, proclaiming forgiveness toward the men in Texas. It wasn't that I was against forgiveness, but my initial reaction was – it was too quick. The horror of this event was being rushed by, & passed over, to get to forgiveness – much less reconciliation. Plus, I wondered, what were they uncomfortable about, as they hurried to the concept of forgiveness, ignoring the need to, much less the duty, to lament? Why did they miss the opportunity to proclaim how evil this was?

The journey of reconciliation is grounded in a call to see and encounter the rupture of this world so truthfully, that we are literally slowed down. We are called to a space where often, any explanation or action is too easy, too fast, and too shallow. Instead we must give and take time and space where the right response can only be a desperate cry directed to God, as we name the evil and / or hurt that occurred. We have to absorb the evil, lament, even of our own actions, lament, pray for help, seek forgiveness, and then do reconciliation work.

Not taking the time to lament, shorts circuits reconciliation. I don't trust or like quick easy forgiveness. Especially by people who are not personally affected by an event. It's too easy to urge forgiveness without recognizing the deep hurt and pain and often life changes involved.

If we are just a little bit honest, all of us have hurts that have marred our lives in some way. And we have hurt others and left a scar on them in some way. And unless we name those words, actions, and attitudes, and lament, real reconciliation doesn't take place. And some of those past events have affected us for a long time. A toxic boss, betrayal, abuse, rape, even simple meanness and bullying, can have life changing results. The path to healing must go through lament. Then we are fully free to work at reconciliation and find real peace with ourselves and with others and with Jesus..

So I think we are called to learn the anguished cry of lament. The Bible is full of this. Lament is the cry of Martin Luther King Jr. from his kitchen table in Montgomery after hearing yet another death threat: "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. Now, I am afraid. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

Lament is not despair. It is not whining. It is not a cry into a void. At its best it is not self pity. Instead, lament is a cry directed to God. I was hurt! I wounded someone! It is the cry of those who see the truth of the world's deep

wounds and the cost of seeking peace. It is the prayer of those who are deeply disturbed by the way things are. We are urged to learn to see & feel what the psalmists see & feel, & to join our prayers with theirs. The journey of reconciliation is grounded in the practice of lament – naming the evil, the hurt, the fears and so on.

The Apostle Paul reminds his readers that we are in Christ. He offers reasons for his thankfulness for his readers. Next, he tells us about his faithful intercessory prayers for us – that we grab hold of even more than we have in Christ. We have been reminded of the supremacy of Christ, as the firstborn of all creation, that he holds this world together, and that he is the head of the church, above all other powers.

Then in our text today we are reminded of **Jesus' power and authority to be reconciled.** This is what makes us acceptable to God. And we are challenged to continue striving forward in the truth that saves the Colossians and us.

In verse 21 we are reminded that we were once **estranged, hostile in our minds, and doing evil deeds.** So we need the reconciliation that the supreme God offers through his Son. This is one of the characteristics of Christ. God's fullness in Christ is reconciliation toward us.

So we are reminded of what we were like before we were redeemed and reconciled. We are described as **alienated, disconnected and separated, from God.**

Then we are described as having **minds hostile as enemies to God.** Sin begins in the heart and mind. Then **it shows itself in actions.** People are outwardly hostile against God because of their inward hostility. Our intellectual capacities were so distorted that we worked against God's purposes, consciously & unconsciously. We were strangers to God's ways of thinking and as a result of that, we led a life of sin. This hostility can manifest itself in outright rebellion against Jesus, to the subtle ways we ignored the Holy Spirit in our everyday lives. We used our thinking ability to justify ourselves and our actions. But our thinking is against God.

And the third description of us before we are reconciled to God is, **we were engaged in evil deeds**. A general description of evil deeds is, anything that stands in opposition to what God has told us. It's living for ourselves and not for God and His glory, much less others. The mind set on the flesh leads to deeds of the flesh.

There is truth in that we must confront our own sinfulness in all its ravaging depths before we can fully enjoy the comforts of salvation. We must always remember who we are: forgiven sinners, because of Jesus' supreme power of reconciliation. He is our example for living.

Unless I have a keen sense of sin & separation it is not likely that I will continue to grow toward God, or in Christ, or be vibrantly alive in my reconciliation, like Paul desires for us in verses 9, 10, & 11. We need to break through the contemporary disguises of sin. The subtlety of sin is that it always travels incognito, and can even be given status in various ways. So these 3 labels of who we were or are without Christ's supreme power of reconciliation are deadly, serious facts of life we must accept.

But we can rejoice because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. We receive more than reconciliation. **Christ's work allows us to be presented to God as holy, blameless and irreproachable!** Notice these 3 results of being in Christ, of being reconciled, in verse 22, in contrast to the 3 descriptions of who we are without Christ's reconciliation.

The pivotal word "reconcile" is key to understanding what Christ's supremacy has done for us. It's fair to argue that all these descriptor words in verses 22 & 23, express the central experience of the Christian faith. They imply change! God's power does this! They point to the restoration of relationship with our Creator.

But we must note the direction of this action. God has not been reconciled to us, but we must be reconciled to God. This tells us it's God's nature to turn us around toward him. A famous way of saying this is "God is that "hound of heaven" who pursues us through the nights and

days, who "moves our souls to seek Him seeking us," who loves us to the Cross. I am the one to be reconciled. I am the one who needs to lament, to be moved to penitence and surrender. Through Christ's work on the cross, the lost relationship between us and God, can be restored. So we are made citizens of grace.

Then this section ends with verse 23 telling us that not only does reconciliation make us holy blameless and irreproachable, plus **we have the obligation to stand fast in the faith and to never abandon the hope of the gospel**. This implies that reconciliation leads to hope. This implies that the faith, which is proclaimed for every creature under heaven, can be lost; if we start putting our belief's & hopes in other gods.

When we are separated from God, it will affect every other area in our life in a bad way. But a right relationship with God is the foundation for everything else we do in life. Atonement for sin is absolutely necessary because until alienation, hostility and evil works are dealt with, there can be no reconciliation. And the world increasingly needs to grab hold of Christ's reconciliation power between people, tribes, and nations. The supreme God wants to make us holy, blameless and flawless with his reconciliation power. It's more than a cease-fire, or appeasement, or simply settling the past. This brings us the Almighty's level of friendship, trust, unity, and relationship. If we really want true peace, we need reconciliation.

This is God's promise through Christ Jesus. It's what the believer depends on. This is why heresy's that downplay who Jesus really is, are so dangerous. Paul's words of encouragement and warning and lifting up Jesus are as valid today as they were to the Colossians Christians.

Praise be to God! Jesus is the Supreme Reconciler. He works in us. He works on us. He works with us to pass on his reconciliation of us – to each other. He has the power to do this and he passes it on to us. This is Good News! An old saying goes, "Love makes the world go round." So does this line: "Jesus' kind of reconciliation makes the world go round."