

## 2 Corinthians 5: 11-20 "Be Reconciled" Rev. Janet Chapman 6/9/24

Alfred Adler, famous psychologist, once put an ad in the paper for his 14 Day Cure Plan. He claimed that he could cure anyone of any mental or emotional difficulty in just 14 days if they would do just what he told them to. One day a woman who was extremely lonely came to see Adler. He told her he could cure her of her loneliness in just 14 days if she would follow his advice to the letter. She was not very enthusiastic, but she still asked. "What do you want me to do?" Adler replied, "If you will do something for someone else every day for the next 14 days, your loneliness will be gone." She objected profusely, "Why should I do anything for someone else? No one ever does anything for me." Adler paused then replied, "Well, maybe in your case it will take 21 days." So I spent the last couple days with 6 Redding and 22 other northern California Disciples of Christ church friends at our campground outside Foresthill for Adult Camp. It was loads of fun with singing, discussions, laughter, games, swimming, hiking, and exceptional food... and no dishwashing! The theme revolved around the lost art of kindness and reclaiming the practice of kindness in a world that has become so cruel. I was reminded how often we overlook the need for kindness which is so much of the gospel Jesus preached.

In the letters to Corinth, Paul wants to remind us that the sum of the gospel, the whole action from creation to the final resurrection, is contained in one word, reconciliation. Reconciliation is the bringing back together what has been broken, separated or estranged. It is what happens when we put kindness to work daily. God is restless, as are we, until we are reconciled both to God and each other. Paul is inviting us to think anew about our encounters in this world, to surrender to being made anew so that every encounter is an interaction that is life-giving and respectful versus death-wielding and downgrading. It is too easy to keep judging others, including ourselves, by human standards than it is to allow the Spirit to give us new insights within our relationships. Seeing others and ourselves through the lens of Christ's love allows us to let go of old habits and patterns which have only produced division and defeat over the long haul. Our text is ultimately one of hope and much needed promise amidst all sorts of challenges that we face. It speaks to us of God's love that knows everything about us and embraces us anyway. It teaches a love that transforms us to reflect

Christ to our neighbors. It reveals a powerful, reconciling love that makes it possible for people who mistrust or misunderstand each other to be brought into mutually-edifying relationships. This is good news in a time when neighbors and family members, coworkers and church friends are having a hard time even talking with each other about the conflicts which plague our country and community. People go off in their little corners and cannot even engage with those who hold a different opinion in a respectful and honest manner. I received a bumper sticker in the mail a couple months ago that I seriously considered placing on my car which stated an obvious fact regarding our U.S. constitution, but was informed it would only spark division and hatred, which may play out in vandalism to my car. I was dumbfounded, but trusted the advice and grieved the inability to freely express ourselves, to share an opinion, without fear of retribution. To this, our scripture prods us to surrender to being made new again and again, not getting dissuaded by setbacks. Our God is in the business of reconciliation and is still working to help us experience that new life which has already come, while the old life passes away. Becoming a new creation by God's guidance means that we refuse to be complacent with anything less than what God has promised us.

Some of us remember the days after 9/11 when all Muslims were viewed as the enemy and some churches resorted to locking their doors for worship so no stranger could come in and threaten them. It seems to me that we are once more in a similar tendency where we might not be locking up our sacred spaces, but we are locking up our minds and hearts to those who are different, practicing hypocrisy far more than kindness. Nowhere did this become more prominent than in that reality TV series called "19 Kids and Counting" about the Duggar family and their fundamentalist Baptist faith, their condemnation of any kind of birth control, and their peculiar view on purity. The four eldest daughters wrote of the family code word for women dressed immodestly in public: "Nike." It was not simply an instance of product placement, which my Oregonian friends would have appreciated, but it pointed out the tight-fitting, flesh-baring exercise attire promoted by the company. Upon hearing the word "Nike" by one of the Duggar women, the Duggar men were expected to "nonchalantly drop their eyes and look down at their shoes as they walked past the woman." The insinuation was clear: Women's bodies are the source of inappropriate sexual desire and

men are, practically speaking, helpless to resist seeing such bodies as sex objects. A peak at cleavage could completely unravel the new creation characteristic of godly men, such as father Jim Bob and the eldest son, Josh. Those poor men – it must have been so terrible for them, especially as Josh was arrested for molesting five underage girls when he was in his mid-teens. Such hypocrisy is what Paul is trying to eliminate from the church as he urges us to be reconciled to God and each other.

Retired Bishop Will Willimon shares a story from when he was a boy of 10 years old and called to the principal's office. As he trudged there, he tried diligently to figure out what he may have done wrong to get called in. He sat down and the principal started, "Listen carefully as I don't intend to repeat myself. I want you to go down Tindal Rd. 2 blocks and turn left, go 2 more blocks to number 15. I've got a message to be delivered. You tell Jimmy Spain's mother if he's not in school by this afternoon, I'm reporting her for truancy to Child Protective Services." Willimon left the school in a daze, not even sure what truancy meant. As he approached the not so nice part of town, he came across #15, a small house, peeling paint, and bare yard. It was just the sort of house Jimmy would live in, tough and sinister looking. He was the roughest thug in all the school. If they had lived in a just world, Jimmy should have been in the eighth not sixth grade, but he kept getting held back. As Willimon approached the yard, a man emerged, letting the screen door slam as he stepped off the porch, adjusted his tie, stretched his suspenders, and lit a cigarette. "Are you Mr. Spain, sir?" the timid boy asked. As he asked, he remembered that everybody said Jimmy was so mean because he didn't have a daddy. The man looked down and laughed, "Mr. Spain? Yeah, right" and he got into his fancy Buick and sped off. It was a few years later that he came to understand what Jimmy's mom did for a living. He knocked on the door and Jimmy opened it, startled to see a fellow classmate. Before Jimmy could say anything, his mom joined him in a faded blue terrycloth robe and asked, "What do you want?" Willimon spurted out, "Er, I'm from the school. The principle sent me to, uh..." "Principal! What does that old fool want?" she interrupted. The boy went on, "Er, he sent me to say that we, uh, that is that everybody at school, that we all miss Johnny and wish he were there today." "What?" she sneered, pulling Jimmy toward her. "Yeah, it's like a special day and everyone wants Jimmy there. We

are doing some special stuff. Music maybe. Ice cream, for all I know. Everybody thinks it won't be as special if Jimmy's not there. I think that's what he said." Jimmy... the thug who could beat up any kid in elementary school, even the older ones, peered out in wonderment. Suddenly this hood, feared by all, looked small, being clutched by his mom, his eyes embarrassed, hanging on Willimon's every word. The mom said, "You tell that old man it's none of his damn business what I do with James." Then she looked down at her son saying, "James, do you want to go to that stupid school today or not?" Jimmy didn't take his eyes off his classmate as he nodded a yes. "Suit yourself, go and get your stuff and take that dollar off the dress to buy lunch. I ain't got nuthin' here." In a flash, Jimmy was back and the two walked without a word back to school. Somehow, they both knew, without knowing, that they had been part of something bigger than the two of them, more than words can say. As Jimmy entered the office, he looked back at Willimon with a look of regret, embarrassment, but also a great deal of gratitude. When Willimon got home after school and told his mom what had happened, she blew up. "That is the most outrageous thing I've ever heard of...sending a young child out in the middle of the school day to fetch a truant. And on that street. The principal should have his head examined. Don't you ever allow anyone to put you in that position again." But Willimon looks back on it now and thinks his mom was wrong. That day was his best day ever in elementary school. That day of kindness, that encounter with a bully and with a God who thinks nothing of outrageous assignments being given to ordinary boys and girls, was preparation for when two decades later he would accept a call to ministry, for once again God had a message to be delivered. By not counting our mistakes against us, God reconciles you and I, bringing back together what has been broken, and trusting us with this message of reconciliation. As Christ's representatives, come be reconciled to God!