

2 Corinthians 5: 14-19 "Ministry of Reconciliation" Rev. Janet Chapman 6/13/21

While on vacation, I attended the memorial service of a good friend from college along with another good friend. On the way to the service, we got to reminiscing about all the silly practical jokes played in our hall at Northwest Christian College's Burke-Griffeth dorm. Several of those pranks were instigated by my now deceased friend in partnership with the one who accompanied me. They were infamous for things like pouring water under hallway doors so you got out of bed in the morning and slopped through a mini-flood, to moving my entire side of the dorm room into the bathroom, including my bed which sat on top of the toilet stalls, to stuffing half my room to the ceiling with crumpled up newspaper creating an impenetrable wall right down the middle. It was America's Funniest Home Videos before that was a thing. I learned that day that my travel companion Stephie had participated in far more practical jokes than I had given her credit for, and we half-joked that Susanne was now probably in heaven concocting all sorts of pranks on unsuspecting residents, God help them. One of the things I will miss most about Susanne was her spontaneous phone calls just to talk theology. Although she worked in Finance for one of the Portland school districts, her heart was in discussing spiritual matters. I once read a quote that reminds me of her. It said, "A secret to the spiritual life is desiring to actually be more spiritual than you appear to be..." Let me repeat that, "A secret to the spiritual life is desiring to actually be more spiritual than you appear to be." Then it goes on to say, "The secret to hypocrisy is desiring to appear more spiritual than you actually are." Susanne was one who was actually far more spiritual than she appeared to be but never got sucked into appearing more spiritual than she actually was. She was true to herself, and to God, right up to the end.

I'm afraid not all of us can say the same. That was certainly the case for the church at Corinth, to which our scripture is written. They were caught up in a whirlwind of judgement and condemnation not just against each other but against Paul himself, the author of the letters. In our text, Paul is appealing to the estranged congregation to be reconciled to God and to himself. Finding ourselves in this text involves being willing to admit that, to some degree, we are all hypocrites at one time or another, we have all committed sins which harmed relationships in our past. Dennis the Menace is pictured kneeling at his bedside, hands folded, his eyes looking toward heaven. With an imploring look on his face, he prays, "I'm here to turn myself in." Confessing and owning up to our mistakes is one of the most difficult practices in the Christian faith. So we tend to gloss over such things and instead speak most loudly and passionately against the sins to which we are most subject. Sometimes we think the best way to keep guilt and hurt feelings at bay is to hand them off to someone else, to pour guilt and offense on others, to blow out someone else's candle so that our candle will somehow grow brighter. A pious but cranky old woman was offended because her neighbors had not invited her to a picnic. On the morning of the picnic, one of the neighbors finally called to ask her to go along. "It's too late," snapped the woman at the caller, "I've already prayed for rain."

Ironically, these days, that might be a blessing more than a curse. Others have found more imaginative ways to heap hot coals on their enemies including a customer whose bank in northern California was offering to print personal photographs and drawings onto standard checks. With each check written, the recipient received a personalized image not found anywhere else. Undeterred by the higher cost for such elaborate checks, more than 500 customers signed up. The most memorable, however, was the customer who ordered special

checks to be used solely for making his very large alimony payments to his ex-wife. In revenge, the picture on the checks showed him kissing his new, much younger and more beautiful wife. It was the epitome of narcissistic revenge.

These are examples of the patterns of behavior, whether subtle or overt, that Paul is addressing and encouraging Corinthians to avoid, for they are inconsistent with the new life God gives through Christ. It all starts with no longer regarding others from a human point of view but rather from God's point of view. Paul is teaching us that through the reality of Christ's example on earth, God not only doesn't hold our mistakes against us but invites us into that same ministry of reconciliation, not holding others' mistakes against them. The text is all about broadening our vision regarding how we look at our neighbor, and even the world, as a new creation. In this new community that God has created on earth, we are called not to look at one another from our own narrow perspectives such as "Do I like him? Do I agree with her?" or "They get on my nerves." Rather, we are called to look at each other as new creations, through the waters of baptism, and as pilgrim companions on this faith journey. We don't look at the old for we have all been made new in the waters of baptism. A story is told about a sheep-raising farmer who lived next door to a farmer who raised wheat, children, and large dogs. The dogs were always scaring the nearby sheep. The sheep farmer had tried asking the neighbor to keep the dogs under control but to no avail and he didn't know what to do. He could shoot the dogs or poison them, be nasty to his neighbor, or even take him to court. He prayed that he might somehow see the whole situation with a larger perspective than he had before. In the early spring, when the new lambs were born, he asked his neighbor if he could give each of the neighbor's children one of the lambs as a pet? The neighbor agreed and the

children were beyond thrilled. However, the father could no longer let the dogs run rampant as before and restrained them for the sake of the pet lambs. From then on, the two farmers were the best of friends.

Taking on an expanded perspective, we learn to live out that ministry of reconciliation Paul speaks of. Of course, reconciliation goes hand in hand with forgiveness. Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote, "Without forgiveness there can be no future for a relationship between individuals or within and between nations." Those who like Tutu that have engaged in this path know that the future depends on this ministry of reconciliation. The future for individuals, nations, humanity and all the earth will depend not on our staking claims, not on protecting "our" rights, not in guarding boundaries, not in waging war, but in this difficult discipline of reconciling forgiveness. Brother Roger of the Taize community has encouraged Christians, "Never resign yourself to the scandal of the separation of Christians, all who so readily confess love for their neighbor, and yet remain divided. Be consumed with burning zeal for the unity of the Body of Christ...The relentless divisiveness among Christians is a scandal which continually divides the body of Christ and it essentially nails Jesus back on the cross." It is too easy to say we love God and people, and then go about our daily business as if nothing has changed. We cannot say we love our neighbors and not help them in their distress. Therefore, one of the polar stars which guides us is that we are not the only Christians but Christians only. Living with the unity of the body of Christ as a central goal is essential to becoming ministers of reconciliation. We have been entrusted with this message of reconciliation to be shared with the person sitting next to us, the one standing in the street, in the unsheltered, in the refugee, in the hungry, in the lonely, in the sick, and all those calling out for help.

Kent Nerburn tells a story published in Christian Century about a young man who was on trial for murdering a girl he had seen walking down the street. He had not known her personally. She hadn't wronged him in any way. The case was not unlike the grandma and 1 year old grandchild murdered in Florida last week or 6 yr. old Aiden killed in the back seat of his car 3 weeks ago on Anaheim's Hwy 55. In this particular trial, the crime of the victim was simply being young and alive and in the wrong place at the wrong time. The attorney described the specifics of the murder and the horror was almost too much to bear; but through it all, the father of the victim sat impassively, watching the trial, watching the boy. After the trial was over, the boy was found guilty and the father announced that he was going to visit that boy in jail and get to know him. People were appalled. Why would anyone who had suffered what this father had suffered undertake such a task? But the father was adamant. "That boy and I are forever bound... we need to know each other. I don't know if I can forgive him. But perhaps if I know him, I will not hate him. This is about healing and reconciliation." And Paul said, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view;... so if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Let the healing begin...