### “Be Reconciled to Your Brother” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Feb. 12, 2023

**1 Cor 3:1–7**

1 And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, 3for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? 4For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human?

5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. 6I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

**Matthew 5:23–26**

23 “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Welcome to First Church. It is always a joy to see our church family who, from all walks of life, come together here to worship. Today, both of our Scriptures talk about life within a congregation, with two very different groups of people, some who are lifted up and praised unnecessarily, and some who are being condemned and sued. I definitely don’t think there is anything that dramatic going on in our congregation, but the lessons are still helpful.

Apparently there is serious conflict and competition in the Corinthian congregation. Paul tells the Corinthians that they are just “infants in Christ,” ready only for milk and not solid food (1 Cor 3:1–2). The evidence is their factionalism, where one group says it is of the party of Paul, and another, of the party of Apollos, who was an apostle who had followed Paul in preaching to them. But the apostles do not matter, Paul insists. For it is only “God who gives the growth,” only God who really matters (3:7), and should be the focus.

Paul’s criticism could also apply in our popular culture today, where people become fans of certain stars, and live vicariously through the admired star. We sometimes do this with actors, singers, athletes. And even some churches make stars out of their pastors. But that’s not what an apostle is supposed to be, Paul says. An apostle is one who waters the garden and nurtures the plants, but gives credit to God for the actual growth taking place. Again, God is the real source.

Factionalism and idolizing particular leaders are childish and materialistic behaviors. “Grow up,” Paul is saying. Recognize your behavior, leave the factionalism behind you, and turn to Jesus, the true leader and Son of God.

Paul indicts the Corinthians for being full of conflict and pride. We might see some of that in the background of the gospel passage, too, for it involves someone in church holding a grudge against you, and what you should do about it. Here he outlines our steps: You should immediately seek to come to terms with your accuser, whether they are motivated by pride or not. We see that reconciliation takes priority over any ritual activity you may want to undertake. Drop what you’re doing, “leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother,” Jesus says (Matt 5:24).

This is one of the times when Jesus tells us what’s most important in the religious arena. He is telling us that relationships are more important than ritual or public worship. Go fix the relationship, then you can come back and finish the ritual, whether leaving an offering or something else. Recent studies reveal that those with strong relationships live longer and happier lives. Truly, no man is an island.

Jesus imagines a situation where someone in the congregation is taking you to court. But his advice really has little to do with justice, laws, or rights. He’s saying to get the dispute settled quickly, because it is wrong to have a lingering problem in your relationship. Maybe the solution is to become a good listener; get to the bottom of exactly what is bothering the other person. Relationship skills are essential here. Settle the problem. Preserve the relationship. Civility and brotherly love are essential. Don’t let a dispute fester, and don’t even let it reach the courtroom, if you can help it.

You can hear Jesus’ emphasis on love and brotherliness here: “first be reconciled to your brother or sister. Come to terms quickly with your accuser” (5:24–25). First things first, and being reconciled with your brother or sister is first. Preserving the brotherhood and sisterhood is of primary importance. Jesus does not want any ongoing conflict among believers. He wants litigation removed from the believing community.

Christians have too often ignored Jesus’ advice about conflict resolution. Competitiveness and self-promotion are inconsistent with the kingdom. Even worse are hostility, umbrage, and vengeance. Churches especially should be places for reconciliation and communication, not recrimination or factionalism.

If you have faced hostility in your life (and really, who hasn’t?), you know it can be difficult to repair the situation. Your efforts to reach reconciliation may be rebuffed. But you at least need to *try*. You must be committed to your relationships.

Sometimes the conflict would be solvable through efforts at active listening and refraining from criticism or judgment. This is a common goal of conflict resolution. If people can get together and explain where they’re coming from, putting an emphasis on their values and their feelings, each party can start to understand and appreciate the other party more easily, and they can learn to develop mutual respect, even if agreement is not possible.

If each party feels that the other is listening and striving to understand, it reduces the heat and increases the light. We may discover many similarities, even if full agreement is not going to happen. Then, we find it easier to appreciate and, hopefully, to respect the other. Sometimes, a full peaceful settlement may not be possible, but we are obliged to try.

Finding peace *is* a real triumph. Shakespeare says “A peace is of the nature of a conquest for then both parties nobly are subdued, and neither party loser.” (*Henry IV*, Act 4, Scene 2). Now there was a South African woman named Joanna who entered as a volunteer into a prison where daily acts of violence were often seen. She started holding trust and reconciliation classes, and got prisoners to open up about details of their horrific childhoods. The violence level in the prison went down precipitously, because people, both black and white, felt heard and understood, and discovered common ground. The results were so impressive that the BBC made two documentaries about her work (https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-on-reconciliation/).

This story can inspire us in the church, even though we are not enduring violence. Another place to look for inspiration and ideals is the letter to the Ephesians, which offers this advice: “Speak the truth . . . let no evil talk come out of your mouth, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit” (Eph 4:25, 29–30). We must be “forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (4:32). “Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love” (5:1).

James adds this advice: “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). Whether we want to go so far as to be confessing to one another, we certainly *do* want prayer to guide the life of the church. Again, these are our ideals, and if we wed our hearts to these ideals, they will become easier to practice in the difficult circumstances of real life.

So here’s your assignment. “Pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” “Be forgiving one another.” Go practice this in your life. “Go, first be reconciled.” Pray for help in enacting these principles in your life. If you sincerely ask for help you will always get it.