



"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

June 24, 2018

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 4:26-34; 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:13

*God's Echoing Call for Reconciliation*

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Words and deeds are seeds. They scatter across generations, sprout and grow and get harvested among us. God said: "Let there be ..." and sacred goodness still resounds in chirps of songbirds and barks of dogs, clucks of dolphins and roars of lions, and the whistle of the wind. Hebrew prophets called out what was wrong in society and what God wants. Mary sang of that divine vision as she birthed the Word made flesh. Jesus called people to follow him in God's way of love—teaching compassion, caring for outcasts, embodying grace every day. That holy voice filled Paul's mind and heart as he cultivated early Christianity. And so, God's call echoes through other kin in Christ over all the ages. From the Psalmist through prayers by Julian and John and Howard and Toyohiko expressing our human experiences, our longings for the holy. And you know, when some nice turn of phrase in a prayer or sermon or conversation comes to me, even if I can't cite credit, surely someone has said it before. I love hearing the Divine Voice echo in favorite hymns like "God of Grace and God of Glory" or "Make Me a Channel of Your Peace", when we all join the choir to "sing with the Spirit."

Words and deeds of faithfulness resound as we seek together life in the fullness of grace and peace. I even like the prayer for illumination from old Clement of Rome in the first century. Though I beg to differ a bit in practicality, or maybe I resonate if it's more a longing appeal. We do not remain blameless, do we? It's the right idea and hope. But let's recognize reality. You see, trouble is, our human points of view

are limited and lives get flawed. As one scholar writes about this passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, human judgments are not merely inadequately informed. They also get tinged with prejudice and bias. Our judgments get infected and twisted by our own selfish interests.<sup>1</sup> No surprise ... sin infests the church as much as personal choices and society. We are not as close to God's Holy Way of Love as we could and should be. We need reconciliation, as Paul calls it.

He knows it from his own life. At first, he saw followers of Jesus as wrong and unfaithful. Jesus broke religious laws. His followers posed a dangerous threat to established human standards of faith. They must be eradicated, with every reason to be persecuted. Yet, somehow Paul came to see how wrong *he* was about the people he condemned. Maybe he actually met them as humans. Maybe God opened eyes of his heart enough to glimpse the sort of love and goodness and purpose in their lives that defined his. A captivating voice, a flash of insight, and he couldn't see the way to go anymore. I wonder if we've had a time or two we finally got what God was trying to communicate. More powerfully, intimately, ultimately than how wrong he'd been, Paul knew God's love in Christ. God's love in Jesus that transformed lives of people beyond the bounds of acceptability, to which Jesus remained faithful unto death on a cross. God's love that raised Christ to new life with hope that all people would be so empowered ... this potent and purposeful love was for him, Paul, as much as anyone else, despite how mean and bad he'd been. That's reconciliation. That's restoration. That's resurrection. Paul accepted deep in his soul that in Christ, God saved him. God released him from his offenses to entrust him with Jesus' gospel message of love and life in the fullness of peace. God turned Paul from of a practitioner of persecution to an ambassador of reconciliation.

Now Paul had a reputation, of course. When Jesus' first followers heard about this holy transformation, they must think: yeah, what is God doing?! That dudes got faith about the size of a flea or a mustard seed. But then thanks to Jesus, we know

what happens to mustard seeds. Like the greatest of shrubby apostles, putting forth branches on the tree of Christ, his bass or tenor or countertenor continues to echo over all the centuries to us. The Divine Voice of Love and Reconciliation carries through Paul's letters to inspire us to keep sharing that message. Living for others beyond self. Seeking God's vision beyond our poor judgments. Knowing others as Christ would know them with compassionate grace. Judging others as Christ would judge them with forgiving mercy, and sacrificial generosity more than established standards of what is right for all human life.

Reconciliation, Paul calls it. Friends, it doesn't mean we all become exactly the same. Paul has no illusions about the depth of difference we might sense, and the conflicts we can feel—in our families, with friends, at work, wherever we live. Still, created as we all are in God's goodness, there's something deeper, broader, greater that we share. Reconciliation means seeking, finding, centering on a common goal. Whatever the imperfect standards of human society, we call that goal, the kingdom or the commonwealth of God's heaven. So we are ambassadors, Paul says, for that realm of Christ, reconciling all people and creation to God's intention for life. That's why we come together as a church, in the spirit of the Psalmist long ago—to share through our unity the holy blessing of eternal life made as real as oil on the head or dew running down the mountains in rivulets of grace. That's why our General Assembly met this past week to address needs and concerns of our world, as well as standards and practices in our own church life together that prove to be imperfect.

In one piece of action the Assembly recommends study and reflection on Martin Luther King, Jr's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" to consider whether we should add it to our Book of Confessions as guiding expressions for our faithfulness. You may know, King was arrested and jailed on Good Friday 1963, in response to non-violent coordinated marches and sit-ins to advance the cause of Civil Rights. He was

treated harshly in jail. And a group of white clergy wrote a public letter printed in the paper titled “A Call for Unity” in which they urged him to pursue less tense and controversial means, more conversation and compromise. On the margins of that newspaper smuggled in to him, King began to appeal to their good will with patient and reasonable terms. He observes that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” as we exist in a “network of mutuality,” where “whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” How do we know? How do we discern? How do we tell the difference in just and un-just laws? How does it square with God’s eternal law of Love, he answers, that uplifts humans and does not degrade?

There was a time when the church was very powerful, King writes. ... early Christians rejoiced (perhaps he thinks of the Corinthians) when they suffered for what they believed. More than a thermometer of popular opinion; the church was the thermostat transforming mores of society. Town power structures sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace." But they went on with the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven" and had to obey God rather than human standards. Though small in number, their big commitment brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.

“I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour,” King urges. “... I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are presently misunderstood.... We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.”<sup>ii</sup>

Friends, I love the church. Not because we always get everything right. Not because every conversation within these walls and relations we share out there are perfect bliss. Far from it. Often even our best faithful intentions prove faulty. I love the church, because here God gathers us to be better than we already are. Because we

love each other enough to seek truth as we speak our experience and concerns. Because we love each other in God's grace, even after we've been hurt. I love being the church because at our best, through all times of joy or affliction, God keeps making that appeal of grace and promise of peace through our combined passion and open-minded / open-hearted compassion, our confident energy and humble apology. I love being the church, the body of the risen Christ, because we love God and God's world enough that we keep asking questions. We keep learning more about all that history can remind us; all that science can discover and arts and literature can express; all that news and personal conversations can open the eyes of our hearts to, in ever broader, fuller, deeper ways.

You see, Paul's change of direction pivots entirely on his perception of God in Christ. Paul sees Jesus and envisions faith in a new way. And that empowers him to look upon our world and really see others in a new way. Friends, we always come to new understandings of what we believe about Holy Love in this world. That's natural. That's what it means to be alive. If we don't then I daresay you might as well bury us. What we believe, what we give our heart to in new ways, shapes then how we behave; how we live in new ways.

Ailih will share in a few moments what she experienced at our General Assembly this past week. Highlights of what it was like to serve, and what decisions were made to inspire further action. Maybe we'll hear in it all a message of that reconciliation which God calls us to echo here in our own time and place and circumstances whatever they are.

This congregation gets that spirit. That's why we called the first woman ordained to be a minister in the Presbyterian Church to serve this congregation. That's why we've helped start so many of the social service agencies in our city. That's why we ran one of the first free health clinics in our nation. That's why we keep tutoring and

feeding and welcoming refugees. That's what I heard in several conversations with you just this morning about family circumstances. That's why several people contacted me this week asking what can we do about what we see and hear in the news?

It's not too hard to see a need for reconciliation, is it? For reunification of little children separated from their parents, filled with fear in a strange land.

Reconciliation of leaders to address such situations that we surely didn't seek, but that we can't avoid. And ambassadors for Christ, from a moral perspective to somehow seek in it all, through it all, above all human standards, reconciliation of it all with God's intention and desire for us all to share life in the fullness of peace and prosperity, closely cared for and connected with those we love. That's surely no easy task. And there are multiple perspectives we need to hear. At least, one thing I believe: as little children wailed through interrogations, imprisonments, sleepless nights, hardships, hunger (what was Paul's list again in scripture?); as surely their parents wept on the inside even if tears didn't flow on the outside; I believe God wept right alongside them. And just maybe our holy tears can open wide our hearts and urge us on with the love of Christ, as God makes an appeal for grace and peace through us.

"Never before have I written a letter this long, or should I say a book?" King jokes. I'm afraid that it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers?"<sup>iii</sup>

What else is there to do, dear friends? We keep echoing God's call for reconciliation.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Earnest Best, *Second Corinthians* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 53.

<sup>ii</sup> Quoted and abridged from Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail* ([https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter\\_Birmingham\\_Jail.pdf](https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf))

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*