



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

September 30, 2018

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

John 20:19-23, 21:15-19;
2 Corinthians 5:11-20

Tending Bridges of Reconciliation

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Our church library has a book titled *Callings: the Purpose and Passion of Work*. It's a StoryCorps collection of everyday lives, people using gifts of sacred grace (as I read it) to make life flourish for others, and so, for themselves. Barbara Abelhauser is a bridge tender in Jacksonville, Florida. She's made road gates go down and a drawbridge go up, for eight years. She took a little break from old work she dreaded—maybe a year or two. "But here I am," she says, "many years later. The pay's horrible, benefits are worse, but the job is great!" She sits in a tiny house, about the size of this pulpit—just a seat and console of buttons. Bathroom is in a building across the street, "which makes it fun," she notes, "when it's pouring rain! But it's got windows all around, and the most gorgeous view in the city. The bridge was built in 1927. And twenty-four / seven for all the years since, there's been someone sitting in that house—always. I wonder what the person was like 1927. And who the first woman was.

"There's a rite of passage with teenage boys," she laughs. "Egg the tenderhouse ... it scares the life out of you! But the bridge is a place of community. Joggers, dog walkers, dates and marriage proposals—people consider the bridge part of their lives. People walking past say the most intimate things. They don't even know we're there. We're like this invisible force in the world. And I get to know people I don't talk to, but I see every day. A fisherman used to come through like clockwork every morning. Never knew his name. We'd always wave. One day, he came

through, I waved, and ten minutes later he had a heart attack, on that boat alone. His boat washed up on shore. I realized I was the last person to see him alive.

I see things others miss. The alligator below my window, where she lays her eggs, they hatch and little baby gators bark. There's dolphins and the same manatee (I know his scars). A heron that sits all night and a crow that likes to attack as I'm walking off the bridge. I just talk to him. And then sunsets and sunrises, like snowflakes, no two alike. The job can be relaxing and white-knuckle stress. People have died or lost limbs. The average opening takes just four minutes, but some people get so impatient, U-turn and go the long way round, which, of course, takes longer. Other people get out of their car take pictures and enjoy the interruption. I get paid to stop and look—that's the thing I love most about this job."ⁱ

Tending bridges. That's how Paul sees our ordinary life, the ministry God calls us to share. As he writes to the Corinthians, his language pictures Jesus bridging the gap between us and God. In Christ, God reconciles us, connects us with the Holy Ground of All Being. In Christ, God gives us the ministry of reconciliation, tending loving connections with God and others to make life flourish for all.

That's what we're thinking about in worship this September. How we and all of life can flourish as God wants. We begin with dignity embodied in every person, upheld, nurtured in community. No matter how much money, how perfect decisions, how twisted perspectives may seem, all have value because God creates and loves us. With dignity, each person bears responsibility for life in all creation. Grateful, generous, sacrificial love moves us to see with compassion, enter a situation, offer practical care, and heal harm. That shapes our most intimate personal relations. And we reflect that Holy Love in widest spans of public life. We see truly, care deeply, choose intelligently, act courageously pursuing justice—God's loving order of fairness and goodness so all people and creation can flourish. With this purpose

clear, friends, today we see that reconciliation ever remains a central practice for living faith. Reconciliation is how we make God's reign of love real.

Reconciliation. Big word. What does it really mean, look like in our ordinary life? I think of restoration. God gives us the work of restoring abundant life. And that doesn't happen without restoring relationships. Building bridges between God and us, and with one another. Or maybe it's truer to say we tend bridges that God builds between us. For too often, our best plans and efforts, as earnest and imperfect as they are, can make rifts get worse, chasms get wider. When we humbly give our lives to God's grace, then a foundation gets laid and a span created. Here's the lay of the land I see. God created us good to live abundantly together in community. But so many experiences seem so far from what God wants.

We face choices and consequences, that may make us wonder if God still loves us. Or at least can make us feel we're hacking and scratching through a tangled thicket of life when a highway of goodness hums across a gorge on the other side. How do we get over there? How do we restore relationship with God?

In our family and friends, a chasm of conflict alienates us from one another. We might still hear the words echo off canyon walls or feel the hurt when we found out about what someone else did. How do we get back together? How do we restore loving relationship with others?

In our society, misunderstanding, insensitivity, abuse cause rifts of enmity, fear, and anger. If we try to exist on our own little islands of ideology, inevitably life isn't as balanced and full as it could be, as in the city of God whose lights on the horizon we all still see. How do we get to God's kingdom, the heavenly commonwealth Jesus leads us toward? How do we restore compromise, collaboration, shared celebration?

Then there are aches and pains, health limits we discover, diagnoses we receive, that sure make it seem there's a gulf now from the good life we've had, or we imagined ahead. And maybe, most poignantly make us fear an abyss that may grow between us and those we love. How do we get to and stay in that place of joy and peace, that we believe God wants for us?

Reconciliation is trying to help all who feel distant from God's desire for abundant life get a little closer. If anyone is in Christ, Paul writes, there is a new creation. We share restoration. Old life has passed away. See, believe, live as if everything has become new. Friends, that's Jesus' mission. He lived reconciliation. He healed people suffering, separated from others, restoring them to life in community. He broke barriers of fear and bias eating with people shunned because of things done, ethnicity, place in society or practice of faith. He forgave people burdened by guilt or shame or condemnation for something past, to restore confidence and purpose, warning any who may cast a stone to consider their own lives. He taught parables and principles for living faith, often challenging accepted norms and prejudice, endlessly urging people to look with compassion, find goodness in another, all as children of God.

And when he lived this way of life until his last suffering breath on the cross, here's the good news we sing, we proclaim as the great foundation of our faith. He who once was dead still leads us as the Body of the Risen Christ to preach true salvation in every age and land; to tend bridges built on the foundation of his witness. God entrusts this gospel message of reconciliation to us, Paul urges. And we accept the work of restoration, friends, because we trust God's resurrection power to bring new life, even where we can't find a way across a chasm, when it seems as impossible as the Grand Canyon.

That must be what that disciples felt after Jesus died. A canyon of loss, fear, disorientation, depression. John tells us the Risen Christ bridges the chasm, comes to set them free, empowers them anew to share his ministry. He shows them his wounds, his scars. And as they come to grips with reality, mouth agape, mind dizzy, he breathes the Holy Spirit into them. “Peace be with you,” he urges time and again. “If you forgive you are set free, but if you hold onto sins, they will continue to harm and bind you.”

Then Jesus demonstrates with Peter. “Do you love me?” he asks three times. Just as around another fire two days before, Peter denied him three times. Jesus withholds judgment, rises beyond failure. He affirms the defining character and power of faithfulness ever remains: do we love Christ? Yes? Then love others. Tend my sheep. You see, Jesus entrusts ministry to imperfect people like you and me who respond faithfully, not to prove worthy or earn favor. Rather in gratitude for grace received, we pass along new life, inviting others to share reconciliation, know resurrection. Jesus calls Peter again like the first time beside the sea: Follow me. Jesus sends us to keep bringing new life as he did: forgiving, restoring possibility.

Friends, reconciliation begins with forgiveness. We feel the hurt, we acknowledge wounds; we name wrong done. Yet, through God’s grace, we don’t stop there, cowering in fear. We’ve talked about forgiveness before. Today, two points. First, what’s true in personal association proves true in wider society. Same challenge. Same process. Wider scope. Forgiveness is the first step to repairing relationship, hope, purpose. And second, don’t confuse it with full reconciliation. We can truly forgive, let it go, not let harm define and confine our lives anymore, and still want to avoid the person or situation. We can forgive, set free to move on regardless of what an abuser says or feels. But full reconciliation takes earnest effort from both sides. Seeing the wounds, naming the wrong. Repentance and apology. Maybe restitution, or some other real effort to support restoration of life where it had been taken away.

Genuine reconciliation, full restoration can be very hard. And it's impossible if both sides don't invest the effort.

As a matter of light conversation this week, Chrissy and I talked about forgiveness and reconciliation. Perhaps inevitably we got around to experiences highlighted by events this week. Whatever is true out of Senate hearings, media reports, and FBI investigations, friends, what's real is that sexual assault happens, far more often than reported. And many people relived that trauma as they watched news, read posts, heard comments and conversation around them, perhaps had a monster of memories and emotions let loose again. Chrissy and I wrestled together with how we honor, respect, and support people wherever they are in the process of healing, careful not to shame or imply someone isn't good enough if they can't sit at table with an abuser. We celebrate what healing, what restoration of life has been shared in someone's life and relationships. And still, can we hope for real reconciliation to which Paul calls us?

Friends, we might face chasms that seem too high, too wide, too hard to bridge. A situation I face with a family member seems irreconcilable right now. Limits to what I can do or say to heal and not cause more harm. When Martin Luther King kept hoping for, marching for fullness of life possible in God's love, he carried a book by Howard Thurman. Long before Civil Rights, when deep canyons named Jim Crow wound through our nation, Thurman kept working for reconciliation. Looking for ways to honor what's deepest in every person. Dignity in community. Love that shapes all life, even reflected in public life. Christ came into a locked room and to Peter on the lakeshore. Paul, Howard Thurman, many other saints across the ages compel me to keep following Christ, to trust God intends full reconciled harmony of all people and places, to believe God is with us, filling us with the Loving Spirit wherever we are as partners in Christ's service tending

bridges, until our final breath and beyond. Some small bridges might get built in a few days. Others take years and years, if they ever get finished.

When I was kid, I loved going on 131 to Grand Rapids. I loved the highway intersection downtown where three levels of bridges rise above the ground below. I was amazed. It captured my little Lego imagination. Happy pheromones still hop around inside my head whenever I drive through. I love bridges, like the Mighty Mac I just saw again from a boat about a week ago. Wow! What we humans can do when we put our minds and hearts to it. And maybe that's how a society full of reconciliation looks like, times infinity ... bridges all over. Lots of little ones, almost unseen crossing a small stream, little more than a culvert. Others clinging to cliffs, spanning deep gorges, or stretching to another peninsula, literally on the horizon.

Bridges become places of community: rites of passage, ordinary routines, intimate conversation, friendly waves from afar. See life in all its beauty, familiar scars, shared possibility and purpose. Use our everyday gifts of grace to make life flourish, to tend bridges, even if our force for good seems invisible.

Ten years ago Kevin Berthia's infant daughter was born premature. \$250,000 bill. He couldn't see a way out of debt. He went to the Golden Gate Bridge. Except, he'd never been there before and had to ask for directions. Highway Patrol Officer Kevin Briggs arrived that day, too. "I saw you standing on the sidewalk," he says to Berthia. "You looked at me, went over that rail; I thought you were gone." Berthia explains: "I just got on the ledge and turned around. I felt overwhelmed with everything, a failure, mad at myself for being in that situation, embarrassed. The compassion in your voice allowed me to kinda let my guard down enough. We talked for 92 minutes about everything I was dealing with. My daughter, her first

birthday was the next month. And you made me see that if nothing else, I need to live for her."

Officer Briggs and others took him to hospital. They didn't see each other again. Berthia didn't want to think and talk about the bridge ever again. Briggs prefers not to see people he meets like that. "But your mother wrote me," he recalls, "and I did contact her." Both felt unsure about connecting again. "When I first saw you," Berthia recalls, "it was just like two old friends apart for a while. That was the first time I was able to talk about everything on that day." Officer Briggs reassures him it's OK to talk about it. "I've found that out with my own depression and things that I kept bottled up for decades," he told Berthia. "You know, I guess we've been through similar things in our lives" Berthia concludes. "I've never been around anybody that's seen me at a more vulnerable state. For you to never judge me, and for me to have trust that I don't often feel, that's what keeps us afloat. The greater picture, is that I need to be here for my daughter. She's 10 now and, had you not been there, I wouldn't get to see her grow up."ⁱⁱ

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Quoted and abridged from "John Maycumber talks with Barbara Abelhauser," in *Callings: the Purpose and Passion of Work* edited by Dave Isay with Maya Millett (New York: Penguin Press, 2016), 17-21.

ⁱⁱ Quoted and abridged from <https://www.npr.org/2015/03/06/390970491/ten-years-later-two-strangers-revisit-what-might-have-been-lost>