

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, JANUARY 10, 2010
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RECONCILIATION
Romans 5:6-11

The message of Romans 5:6-11 is this: God has reconciled mankind to himself - "God and sinners reconciled." Our theme is reconciliation, but we use the term in two distinct ways; one is weak and passive, the other strong and active. The passive sense goes like this: "I'm reconciled to the fact that I don't make friends easily... Reconciled that I may need to settle for any job I can get... that I'm getting older..." To be reconciled is to be resigned to painful truth. The strong sense of reconciliation also includes a problem, faced squarely. But here reconciliation is decisive action that brings peace.

The current conflict in Afghanistan illustrates both senses of the word. In 2002, Afghanistan was generally considered "the good war." Victory seemed quick and decisive, but things have gotten worse lately. Is the current regime a good ally, or is it corrupt and ineffective? Afghan opium farms produced 80% of the world supply in 2009.¹

So must we reconcile ourselves to the fact that Afghanistan is chaotic and ungovernable? Must we reconcile ourselves to a long presence there and meager results? This is reconciliation in the weak sense – lowered expectations.

Or is there real hope of government improvement? We can reconcile – strong sense - with the Afghan people, even with moderate opponents, who want peace and the rule of law. If we're reconciled to the right people, there can be peace.

When we consider complicated problems, we're tempted to go for weak, passive reconciliation. The idea: Get used to disappointment. Lower your expectations. It's harder, but better, to seek positive reconciliation. This is what God has done with us. Let me describe it.

There is a problem in the relationship between God and humanity. On one hand, God loves us and cares for us, since He made us - in His image and His likeness. Like Him, we think, speak, plan, create, judge, and choose. On the other hand, our sins grieve Him. Genesis 6 says that when God viewed human wickedness, "The Lord was grieved that he had made man and his heart was filled with pain (Genesis 6:6). Indeed, Moses said God's wrath burns against idolatry (Deuteronomy 29). In Romans 1 Paul says, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth" (1:18).

And Romans 2 says, "Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed" (2:8). The wrath of God toward sin is like the wrath of a father [or mother] whose child has betrayed him.

Suppose an adult child is a drug addict, homeless, penniless, desperate for the next hit. Suppose that child steals an heirloom and sells it for a fragment of its worth. The parent will be angry and yet grieved. Parents can feel two things at once: Anger and disappointment, yet love and compassion. In five minutes the parent may say, "I never want to see him again" and "How can we help him?"

¹ U.N Report on Drugs and Crime, 12/17/09

The child may be even more conflicted: Guilty, ashamed and afraid. If his father calls, the young man does not want to answer. Yet he does want to answer – to confess, to be forgiven, and to be reconciled to his parents.

Sin and reconciliation are complicated. Sin creates a double obstacle to the relationship between God and man. God is genuinely grieved and angry. There is estrangement on God's side. And there is estrangement on our side. We feel guilty. We resent God's authority, His law, control, and justice. When we think of Him, we may want to change the subject, or change the concept of God. We probably prefer a god who knows most things but not everything, one that hates dictators and the slave trade, but ignores my petty mistakes.

There is distance and alienation, stress and angst, even enmity both on God's side and ours. Some will say, "We must be reconciled [weak sense] to the fact that God is distant, silent, and doesn't prevent pain as we think He should." God says He offers true reconciliation, to restore men and women to Himself. The starting point is a candid description of the human condition.

1. The condition of mankind – sinful, godless, and weak

In a few strokes, Paul labels the human condition. He is candid; he delivers an honest diagnosis without insulting anyone. In ourselves, Romans 5 says humans are 1) weak, 2) ungodly, 3) sinful, and 4) enemies of God. If we are objective – if we can be objective - we know this is true. Romans said all this already, in earlier chapters with different order. Earlier, with good logic, Paul mentioned sin, then ungodliness and enmity toward god, then weakness. Follow that order.

First, we're sinful (5:8). Sin is transgression or violation of God's law. Sin includes folly and a lack of virtue. Sinners often know what is right and choose what is wrong. Sinners know the law and violate it. They are cold rather than loving, selfish rather than fair. At some level everyone agrees about this.

But we disagree about sin. Buddhism has no concept of sin in our sense because Buddhists deny that there is supreme deity to offend. There are laws but they say there is no lawgiver. The Buddhist will talk about excessive attachment to pleasure and unenlightened or ignorant acts, but not sin. Atheists and Deists are the same. No personal god means no sin.

The biblical concept of sin has reference to God. Everyone knows that people violate moral codes, lack virtue, tear the social fabric, and play the hypocrite. But sin is more; it offends God. So we are sinful.

Second, we are godless. Indeed, Paul says we are enemies of God (5:6, 10). A person may believe in "God" and be ungodly. He may check "yes" when asked, "Do you believe in a transcendent spiritual power?" They may believe there is a creator who sees all things. But they think little, respect little, serve little. A few people rail against God. Nietzsche said "god is dead – and we killed him."

Third, we are weak. The famous statement "God helps those who help themselves" was penned by America's great Deist, Benjamin Franklin. The Bible says God helps those who cannot help themselves - the weak. No doubt people are weak. Our bodies get sick; we tire out and break down. We can't lift much or run far. Our minds fail. We forget facts and confuse events. If we do remember what we heard, we forget the source. Is it reliable? Confidential? Our will is just as weak. We want to control our tongue, our mouth, our eyes, but we don't.

Author Anne Lamott illustrates the problem as she describes the writing process: "When I sit down to work [the first task] is to quiet the voices in my head. There's the vinegar-lipped Reader Lady, who says primly, "Well, that's not very interesting, is it?" An emaciated German writes "Orwellian memos" detailing her thought crimes. Parents agonize over her lack of discretion. An old mentor finds her "as bold

and articulate as a houseplant." She says, "Quieting these voices is at least half the battle I fight daily. But this is better... it used to be 87% [of the battle]."²

Right. In our weakness we still get some things done. We can even make progress. We're distracted 50% of the time rather than 80% of the time. The essential problem is not that we can't reform. It's that we can't reform *enough*. We can focus better, but not perfectly, not even close. Maybe you find it easy to focus, but you have serious problems, too, as do I. We can get better, but not enough, not nearly enough.

It is essential that we face this. I once read a column by Michael Kinsley entitled "Yes it really is Brain Surgery."³ Kinsley has Parkinson's disease and said he would soon have a procedure to alleviate certain symptoms. He invited his readers to imagine the conversations he had when meeting a friend in the grocery store: "Hey Mike, do you have any summer plans?"

"Yes, I'm having brain surgery next Thursday. How about you?"

That's a conversations stopper. No one expects to hear that while squeezing melons in the produce department. Kinsley wanted to be casual because he was having a simple procedure called deep brain stimulation (DBS) to reduce his symptoms. Minor surgery really: "I tried to convince myself that it isn't really brain surgery. They don't crack open your skull; they just drill a couple of small holes to put the wires through. Tiny, itsy-bitsy holes." But wait; the holes are dime-sized. Dimes are the smallest coin but a dime-sized hole in the brain? Is there such a thing a minor brain surgery?" No, this is brain surgery.

Kinsley had to face the facts. We must do so, too: we are sinful, godless, hostile toward God and too weak to save ourselves. Then comes the good news. Despite our sin, hostility and weakness, Jesus loves us enough to give his life to reconcile us to himself

2. The Love of God for mankind

The essence of love is giving, and God gives. He so loves the world that He gave His only Son. Paul mentions three aspects of the gift:

First, God gave at the right time. The Father chose the right time to send Jesus to save mankind and reconcile us to Himself: "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law." It was the right time spiritually because Israel was ready, and because the world saw the vanity of man-made religions as never before. The world was hungry. It was the right time culturally because the empire had peace and good roads and everyone knew Greek. God was ready to act and to publish the results. "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Second, God loves the undeserving. We are sinful, godless, and powerless. Why would Jesus die for us? It's contrary to human nature. Paul says, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die." A righteous man is morally excellent and moral excellence can leave us cold or feeling inferior. "It is possible to be morally upright repulsively." We may admire justice and rectitude, but it doesn't move us.

A good man is righteous, warm, kind and attractive. "Good man" might also mean a benefactor – one who has done good for us. Someone might possibly die for that man. But Jesus died for us when we were none of that, when we were sinners.

² *Bird by Bird*, Lamott, page 26

³ *Time*, July 24, 2006, page 68

This year I gave a Christmas gift to someone who certainly didn't expect it. From their perspective, it fell from the sky. I did it because he has helped me in ways he probably doesn't even see. I had to thank him. I felt a mixture of joyful gratitude and self-imposed obligation. I *had to* thank him. There is nothing wrong with such "thank you" gifts. As Paul says, we give them to "good" people.

But it's a rare good to give sacrificially to a stranger. And it is supremely noble to give to someone who is repulsive and hateful. And that is the gospel – not that Jesus came for good, noble people.

That is striking; this is the point. Christ gave his life – he died – for powerless, godless people. We are neither righteous nor attractive. We're *valuable* in his sight, but not beautiful or good.

Jesus did so at great cost. He didn't select a gift, he gave his life. Christ died for the ungodly and this proves or demonstrates his love for us. Four notes:

First, not that God loves, but that he loves us, you and me and all of us together.

Second, Jesus died "for us" is the language of substitution. We have already seen the language of reversal: God gave himself even though we didn't deserve it. But this is substitution: we deserved to die, so Jesus died for us, in our place, on the cross. He died the death that was our due. And he gave us the life he possesses by virtue of his deity and resurrection.

Third, this proves that God loves us. Not "God *demonstrated* his love." Rather it *demonstrates* love, present tense. The work of Jesus still lives, speaks. Yes, we sometimes wonder why God permits disasters, calamities and suffering, why He seems to be silent. But He has proven His love for us twice over:

- Objectively, he died for us on the cross (5:6, 8).
- Subjectively, he has poured his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. This is a past act – from the time of conversion or a time of special experience of God's love – yet it has continuing consequences.

I read a story recently about a young girl who needed to have some surgery. All went well, but there was more blood loss than expected. They didn't have blood banks like we have now. Her brother had the same blood type as she did so the doctor asked the boy, "Would you be willing to donate some blood for the sake of your sister?" The boy said he would and the doctor said he was very brave. The boy did not know what a transfusion was. When it was over, he looked up at the doctor and asked, "How much time do I have till I die?" He thought he gave his life-blood for his sister. That's love – giving your life-blood for someone else. That's what Jesus did for us. It demonstrates his love for us. Now we are reconciled to God.

3. The reconciliation of God and mankind

Life granted

We need each aspect of God's work. Justification is God's cure for our legal problem: we are guilty of violating His law, hence liable to punishment. But when we trust Christ, who offered himself as a sacrifice for sin, he declares us innocent.

Reconciliation solves our personal or relational problem: We were hostile to God and He was hostile toward us in our rebellion. Both parties must act to restore a relationship, but the Bible consistently says that God acted first to repair the relationship. We respond to His initiative. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul says: God... reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them... We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. I would imagine that most people here today are already believers. However, not everyone has been reconciled to God. In ourselves, we are sinners in rebellion. We are weak, but He wants to bring us back to Himself. You are reconciled to Him when you believe, repent and come back to Him. You can be reconciled and have peace with God.

You can also live out that reconciliation by seeking reconciliation if there is a broken relationship. If it's easy, do so today. If hard, plan and pray in order to accomplish the reconciliation.

Relationship restored

So then, God took the initiative: He reconciled us to Himself and Paul calls on us to respond – be reconciled to God. In his name, I repeat the message: "Be reconciled to God. Respond to His offer. This occurs once for all time on the day we believe. If you truly believe, you have peace with God forever.

Reconciliation is a personal event that opens a relationship and relationships must be tended. Scholar Charles Cranfield says the language of reconciliation plays no significant part in Greek or Roman religions "since the relation between deity and man was not conceived" as deeply personal. But in the Bible, the relation between God and man is person-to-person. "We were reconciled to Him through the death of his Son" (5:10). It doesn't get more personal than that.

Implications

Above all, God acted to reconcile us to Himself. We no longer live in fear of God. We're reconciled to Him. Suppose I borrow someone's book, a hardback with observations in the margins. I'm reading it in coffee shop. I step out, drop it in snow, slush and salt and spill coffee all over it. I now want to avoid my friend. We are estranged. I'm stricken. He hears what happened and says, "I heard about the book. Don't worry. There is a great new translation. I just bought it. And when I heard about your distress, it makes me love you all the more, dear friend." You have a friend like that. I do, too. I have several on earth [blessing!] and I have one in heaven.

First, O believer, you are beloved of God. He has accepted you, befriended you. Never forget that.

I know - you can be petty and petulant. You can judge and condemn and say terrible things that you don't really mean. You can accuse and criticize and condemn without bothering to get the facts. You can contradict and snipe when you should be quiet and you fall into cowardly silence when you should speak up. Still God loves you – He LOVES you. Never forget it. You *are* His child. You are His son, His daughter.

Second, rest in Jesus. We read these verses at communion for a reason – they explain how we can commune with Christ. Distress, distance, fear, alienation are gone. "We have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him?" An aside: If someone asks you if you are saved, it's yes and no. Yes, but there is more to come on the last day. "We shall be saved from God's wrath, (5:10) if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him... how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life" (5:11)! Trust Jesus and rest in him.

Third, Seek reconciliation: As imitators of God, we should seek reconciliation. Personally: if there is someone in your family, if there is a neighbor or a co-worker, or a member of the church, go and be reconciled. Act as God acted. Don't live in fear. You belong to a fearless, gracious, reconciling God.

Don't settle for the lesser, passive sense of reconciliation – meekly tolerating misery. Pursue the stronger sense – begin this week.

More broadly, Romans, along with Acts and Ephesians, stresses that the church is a multi-ethnic body. Ephesians 2:16 says, "God reconciled Jew and Gentile, slave and free "in this one body... through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility." Some people think this church is for a certain kind of

person. We do have some traits: sober-mindedness, hard-work, longing for truth, caring for the needy, but I see every social class and I see these traits in every age and ethnicity.

We also seek reconciliation when we tell others what Christ has done: "God reconciled us to himself through Christ... And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

Finally, Paul says reconciliation has cosmic dimension. In the work of Jesus, Colossians 1 says, "God was pleased... to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Colossians 1:19-20). That is, God has, in principle, begun the renewal of all things, the process of making peace with the world.

Since Christmas, I realized that some members of this church work for an innovative technology and engineering firm that brings clean water to cities all along the Pacific rim – India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, China. I believe the Lord is pleased. This is commerce and business at its best – bringing restoration and blessing to this world. It's a good business career and the company makes a profit – no harm in that. But we see more – there is healing for the world and its people, which pleases God.

So then mankind is sinful, godless, and weak. Yet God loves us and sent Jesus for us at the right time and at great cost. This he did to reconcile us to himself – strong sense. And he made us his ambassadors of reconciliation, first through the gospel, then the relationships around us. Believe, act, rest in it.