

Ministry of Reconciliation

Lent 4; Series C

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

During the summer after my first year of college, I worked for eleven weeks straight as a counselor at a Christian camp in Northern Michigan. The campers under my care were mostly middle school boys. Yes, it was an interesting summer! Every evening the camp held a general session during which a band played, skits were performed, and the camp director gave a themed message on a particular passage of the Bible. During one of the messages the director told a story to illustrate the theme of “reconciliation.”

The speaker told a story about a teenage girl that decided to run away from home. It was like a modern day “Prodigal Son” story. The teenager got into all kinds of mischief. At one point, years after running away and avoiding her family, she called her father and told him that she was planning to come home. She told him when and where she would be coming in so that he could pick her up. She arrived at the bus station late in the evening. She was filled with anxiety, not quite knowing the kind of reaction she would get from her father and the rest of her family. When she opened the door to the bus station she certainly saw something she did not expect—a homecoming party. Her father’s first reaction was not in the form of words. He simply went up to her with his eyes filled with tears, hugged her and then said, “Welcome home. I love you.”

I heard the story at least eleven times throughout the summer, but I always looked forward to hearing it again. I knew what would happen. I knew the ending. But I loved hearing the speaker bring a tearful runaway, misguided, and confused child back to her family again. I loved hearing about the tearful, loving, caring, compassionate, and forgiveness-filled father embracing his daughter for the first time in years.

For me and for the hearers, the camp director was a sort of organizer of a family reunion. The speaker brought a message of reconciliation in more ways than one. Through the story of the girl reuniting with her father, the speaker illustrated the greater message of God, our Father’s reunion with us through the forgiveness purchased by his Son’s perfect sacrifice.

The word reconciliation typically means to “bring together” or “reunite.” Paul speaks to the Corinthians in our Epistle lesson and makes the point that he is a Minister of Reconciliation. Similar to the camp director, Paul brings his hearers a loving, caring, compassionate, and forgiveness-filled Heavenly Father who has paved the path homeward for runaway, misguided, and confused children.

Paul speaks of himself as this orchestrator of God’s family reunion. He tells the Corinthians three times in the six short verses of our reading that he and his fellow workers have been given the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18), that God had “entrusted to them the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19), and that they are “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor 5:20). He makes it clear how the Corinthians are to think of him as an Apostle and Pastor. He feels obligated to make his role as a minister of reconciliation clear because many of the Corinthians had doubted and questioned Paul’s authority as an Apostle. They didn’t like the details of this reunion and reconciliation of which Paul was speaking. Some

didn't like their part in the message of God's plan of reconciliation that Paul proclaimed. And so in his second letter to the Corinthians Paul defends his Apostleship and his role as a minister of reconciliation.

I am sure that many of us, at one time or another, have been guests at a reunion. We have attended grade school or college reunions. We have perhaps traveled great distances to be present at family reunions. Hopefully, for most of us, those reunion experiences were positive. We had an opportunity to connect with old friends and revisit family members that we rarely see.

How often, though, our first reaction at an event like a reunion, is to be critical. We may question why the reunion was held at this location and not that location. We may criticize the day and time of the reunion. We may dislike the food and beverages. And how often we speak our criticisms openly to others rather than going directly to the committee or the director that organized the reunion. In criticizing so carelessly we cast doubt on the ability and competency of the committee and the organizer. We cause dissension that hurts not only the reputation of the person or people who worked so hard to bring "reunite" and "bring people together," but we also disrupt the whole group and event by stirring up resentment, hostility, and antagonism. I am speaking specifically about reunions, reconciliations and organizers of such events because that seems to be the analogy that the Apostle Paul works with in the Epistle lesson. He refers to himself and his fellow workers as "ministers of reconciliation" and "ambassadors for Christ." Yet, we all know that the application spreads far beyond just one kind of event or situation.

Similar to the Corinthian Christians and their unhealthy criticism and questioning of the Apostle Paul's authority and capability, we as Christians today, struggle to put the best construction on things. We have a tendency to first speak negatively *about* a person, even an authority figure, rather than to first speak our concerns *directly to* the person. Yet, we also, like the Corinthian Christians, are recipients of God's work of reconciliation and continual hearers of the message of reconciliation. We are supposed to be living and sharing and exemplifying God's reconciliation and forgiveness in our relationships with others. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives us a clear procedure of how we ought to personally carry out the ministry of reconciliation in our lives. It involves first and foremost speaking to the person who we feel has wronged us or done wrong in some way. How often we, even as Christians, do the opposite. When we fail to carry out the ministry of reconciliation and forgiveness according to God's Will, we suffer. Others pay the price. The body of Christ, the Church, experiences the consequences.

Brothers and sisters, we have received God's ministry of reconciliation and forgiveness. We can be confident, even as we struggle as repentant Christians, that we are reconciled to God and have a right relationship with him once again. You come every Sunday morning to hear again, in different ways, and with different words, the story of your loving, caring, compassionate, and forgiveness-filled Heavenly Father who has made his Son to be Sin who knew no sin, so that in him you might become right with him, your Father (2 Cor 5:21). God has sent you a Pastor who serves you as the "organizer of his family reunion," the public "Minister of reconciliation." You come every Sunday to remember anew that your Heavenly Father specializes in bringing runaway, misguided, and confused children home to the household of faith (Gal 6:10). You receive his grace in the Word and the Sacraments. In your Baptism your Heavenly Father made a promise to you and reunited you with himself through the forgiveness purchased and eternal victory won by his only Son. Every day, even as you and I struggle to live as God's reunited, reconciled children, we can return to that promise made through the water and the Word. Every day, we live and love by his grace. Amen.