

## Be Ye Reconciled

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If I had to choose one word to describe today's North American culture, it would be a challenge: but high on the list would be the word, "disunity."

From the halls of congress, to Wall Street and Madison Avenue, to our systems of education, jurisprudence and health care, to the board rooms of the corporate world to our family living rooms—and yes, even in the church—disunity too often is a primary trait.

We humans long for unity; but too often by unity we mean uniformity—conformity to some specific ideology or tradition or doctrine. Nor is unity the same as agreement, although agreeing can give us the feeling that we are unified—at least as long as we agree. And when we confuse unity with uniformity or agreement, we virtually always set ourselves up for failure.

We set ourselves up for failure when, if we don't find the level of conformity or agreement we desire, we resort to familiar power models: manipulation, confrontation, war; using those efforts to inflict conformity to our perspective.

Those power methods of coercion are rooted in what theologian Walter Wink calls "the myth of redemptive violence;" and it is bipartisan. To sustain that myth, we first must locate all evil outside ourselves and assume that our ideology is "right". It follows, then, everything else is "wrong". It's only a short journey from identifying other ideologies as "wrong" to calling them "evil". By ignoring or even denying our own evil, we can justify scapegoating others: the commies, the gays, the straights, the blacks, the whites, the liberals, the conservatives, etc.

The next level in "the myth of redemptive violence" is the conviction that, since other ideologies are wrong, and thus evil, they must be eliminated at all costs, and since our perspective is right and good, it must prevail, no matter what. The result is an "ends-justify-the-means" ethic. And when the good guys finally win (whatever it takes, regardless of ethical or moral considerations) we humans are then able to re-establish a sense of goodness (however the good guys—that's always us—define goodness). We can do this without ever coming to any insight about our own inner evil.

That's not unity. Nor is it peace. It's dominance and intimidation and forced conformity, and to some degree since the emergence of the conquest cultures some 4,000 years before Christ, it has been a dominant pattern of human interaction—and the dominant pattern of resolving conflict and deciding who will control a given relationship, be it one-on-one or global in scope.

Control: possibly the precondition of all human disunity. It at least is the opposite of unity. Yet, lacking an effective model for unity, we too easily settle for conformity, agreement and control.

While I've not found a comprehensive biblical model for unity, I have found "Seven Biblical Principles of Unity" which can be organized in such a way that their cumulative effect is such a biblical model. So, beginning October 7, World Communion Sunday, I'll begin a series of seven sermons on unity.

Paul understood that nothing is more important to God than the unity of God's people. In fact, in the opening verses of Ephesians, he calls unity the secret of God's will (1:10).

Several times I've remarked that, as a congregation, we have a very close-knit fellowship, and there rarely are expressions of discontent; but, where two or more are gathered, sooner or later there will be conflict—even here.

As a counselor and as a conflict resolution consultant, I've found the best time to work on developing unity is before trouble emerges. What we want to do is be prepared to use those moments to grow through the conflict, and emerge on the other side, unified. The word for that process is, "Reconciliation".

II CORINTHIANS 5:17-20 (NRSV) <i>So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!</i> <sup>18</sup> <i>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;</i> <sup>19</sup> <i>that is, in Christ</i>	<i>God was reconciling <u>the world</u> to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.</i> <sup>20</sup> <i>So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.</i>
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The words, reconcile, reconciled and reconciliation appear 16 times in the New Testament, and there are several ways of applying them. I find at least three ways in our text this morning.

I grew up in a tradition in which everything was focused on "getting people saved." There wasn't much emphasis on what to do with people once they were saved, except to send them out to get more people saved. The 20<sup>th</sup> verse of this morning's text was one I memorized as a youth: "...*we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*" (Of course, I memorized it in the KJV: "...*be ye reconciled to God.*"

To my knowledge, in that church, the only application of our call to reconciliation was Evangelism—which is a spiritual discipline most Mainline Protestant churches have abandoned.

In the middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, our denomination was the fastest growing Christian body in the United States. We peaked at slightly over two million members in 1957; and that growth, to a large measure, was the result of an effective ministry of evangelism.

But what had been effective in the 40s and 50s began to lose effectiveness in the 60s, and there was no real effort to make evangelism effective again. The efforts were two-fold: double down on the old strategies and keep pounding away

or abandon evangelism altogether. Neither strategy has worked.

An effective ministry of evangelism may be the greatest need for North American Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; but it's not the only spiritual discipline indicated by this call. There also is a cultural application. It emerges out of verse 19: "*...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, ...and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.*" "*The World.*"

It's impossible to be aware of what's going on in the world and deny the need of reconciliation. Racism abounds; misogyny is flaunted; partisan politics wallows in adversarial confrontations that are counterproductive to the task of governing with justice, and we have a fully functioning caste system keeps the poor and the sick and the fringes of society in their place.

Disciples of Christ confront destructive cultural chaos through our annual Reconciliation Offering. It addresses specifically the anti-racism/pro-reconciliation mission of our denomination, thus is one response to our call to ministries of reconciliation. We accomplish much; but, it's not nearly enough.

And to go along with the evangelistic and cultural applications, our call to a ministry of reconciliation has an inter - personal dimension, and it takes priority over worship:

*MATTHEW 5:24 (NRSV) So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*

So, there are evangelistic, cultural, and inter-personal applications of the ministry of reconciliation; but, what is an effective way to make it happen. Well, Jesus gives a step-by-step answer:

*"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. <sup>16</sup>But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup>If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (MATTHEW 18:15-17 NRSV)*

And, how do we treat a Gentile and a tax collector? Jesus treated them with love and included them in his circle of friends and disciples. And that brings us full circle back around the evangelistic application of the ministry of reconciliation.

When Hubert Humphrey, 38<sup>th</sup> Vice President of the United States, died, hundreds of people came from all over the world to say good-bye. Richard Nixon came. It was his first trip to Washington since the shame and infamy of Watergate. The former President was shunned by virtually everyone present.

When President Jimmy Carter came into the room, he saw Nixon over against the wall, all by himself. He went over to, stuck out his hand, and smiled broadly. To the surprise of everyone there, the two of them embraced, and Carter said, "Welcome home, Mr. President! Welcome home!"

Reconciliation. The restoration of right relationships—with God, with others, and with ourselves. Jesus gave it a higher priority than worship. It is the basis of the ministry to which we've been called.