

Reconciliation

A sermon taken from Luke 15, and preached on March 14, 2010 at Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina by Dr. Ken Carter.

I am either at a disadvantage today, or an advantage, you be the judge. I am telling a story that many of you already know. So there is not much suspense. Even in a somewhat biblically illiterate culture, many know the parable of the prodigal son. It is probably the best known of the teachings of Jesus. That's the disadvantage.

Here is the advantage: yes, it is a story many of know, because we have heard it told or we've read it, but we've also lived it, or we are living it. So I don't need to come up with a creative way of helping you to visualize this story. We have all been there, in the best of families, in the strongest of communities, in the greatest of nations, we have all been there. We can see the son disappearing into the distance and feel the tension in our chests or the aching in our guts; we can taste the bitterness of failure in an experiment that went wrong or a pursuit that came to a dead end; we have awakened to the glimmer of the light of a new day; we have wondered if we really could go home again; we have smelled the aroma of a homecoming feast, and, yes, we have sat in the seat of the judge who wondered how someone so close to us could be so reckless.

So the work we have to do this morning is to think together about this story, with all our minds, with all our hearts. In a real sense this is a continuation of last Sunday's message. We reflected on the meaning of communion, connection with God and with each other, relationships that are both vertical and horizontal. Today we consider, as we must if we are honest about the world as it is, the brokenness of these relationships, the fragmenting of these connections.

A man had two sons, and in the smallest of communities there is division. The younger son wants out of there, demands the inheritance, and is off to the new world. What has been united is now divided. The son goes to a distant country where he squanders these resources on what the Bible calls "dissolute living". You can use your imagination. I have shared that I once preached a sermon on this parable, and I noted that in my mind, when I visualized the son going to the far country and getting involved in loose living, I always thought of Chapel Hill. On the way out of the sanctuary a woman came up to me and said, *"I want you to know that I live in Chapel Hill...and you are right!"*

That was before we had a daughter who attended Chapel Hill, and there is a lot I really don't want to know! The son is at a great distance from home, from his parents, some distance from parents is appropriate, psychologists call it

individuation, but this behavior is self-destructive. And so the son journeys to the far country and literally wastes the inheritance. What promise? What potential? What parent has not surveyed the brokenness and asked, "*if only you could see the life that I wanted you to have?*" How great is the distance between the ideal and the reality?

And then division or separation becomes a way of life. In sophisticated workplaces we call them siloes; in rural African villages we call them tribes; in American religious life we call them denominations, in American government we call them political parties. And of course the division, the separation has a theological name: sin. Sin separates us from God and each other, and the result is brokenness. And so we live in a broken world. In August Pam and I traveled to Liberia and ministered there among the people of the United Methodist Church. We were in conversation one morning with a woman named Nellie, a pastor, a former District Superintendent, now the director of youth ministries for that nation. As she began to describe her work her eyes welled up. Liberia had emerged from a fifteen year civil war. Many of the youth with whom she ministered had been enlisted as child soldiers.

You could drive by a soccer field and see five, ten, fifteen teenagers with amputated limbs, walking on crutches. Others had taken part in crimes that had violated their neighbors. She described the trauma and the need for healing. On the way to Africa I had read about the Rwandan Genocide, In 100 days, 800,000 Tutsis were killed by members of the Hutu tribe. The brokenness can seem staggering in scale, but it can be as near to us as one person, indeed as the closest person to us. To name the brokenness is realism. It is as basic as a nursery rhyme most us learned as children:

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall/Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the kings horses and all the kings men/Couldn't put humpty together again.*

I have wondered about that little bit of wisdom and what it says about us. Can the brokenness be fixed? Can our relationships, at the most basic level, be put together? Can the tribes and nations at war get beyond their brokenness, can the vision of the prophet, the lion and the lamb in peace together, really come to be? Sometimes things get so bad that people are willing to try, to take a step toward resolution, toward communion and this is the work of reconciliation. Reconciliation has become a popular term in our world among governments. When Pam and I were in Liberia we were hosted by Bishop John Innis of the United Methodist Church, who was asked by the President of that nation to lead a Truth and Reconciliation process. Reconciliation is in vogue.

But what is reconciliation? It is individual salvation but it is more than individual salvation. There is no personal transformation without social justice. It is diversity, but it is more than a cultural diversity that is merely the triumph of a particular interest group. It is addressing injustice, but it is more than this, more than the transfer of power from one group to another without the formation of a new community. It is a response to an state of violence and chaos, but it is more than the urgent need to prevent the collapse of a community or a people, in the moment. Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice of Duke define reconciliation as "*the story of God,*" the true story of our lives, and our struggle is to settle for nothing less than this.

We trust our lives to this story. It may embarrass us, it may humiliate us, it may appear as weakness to the world, but it is the goal of God's story: the daughter journeys to the far country but she returns. In the lowest place she hits bottom, she comes to herself, and says, "*I can go home, this is not what life was intended to be*". It is the "aha" moment. This is a key stage in reconciliation: the decision not to settle for life as it is. In his new book *Made for Goodness*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa talks about our tendency to lose touch with who we are, and in the moment of self-discovery, that we were "made for goodness", we simply start walking in the direction of this calling, toward goodness, and the good news is that God is there is to meet us.

Indeed...God is moving toward us. Years ago I heard Jim Moore, a United Methodist pastor in Houston, Texas tell the story of a missionary couple who lived in China. A young man gradually became a part of their group, the study, the fellowship, the worship, and along the way made a commitment to Christ. He was a gifted artist and it was natural that when he asked how he might serve the cause of Christ, he was encouraged by the missionaries to portray the gospel in a painting. He was an intense young man, and so he spent weeks reading the scriptures, searching for the true meaning of the faith that could be expressed by his gift. Finally he was drawn to this parable, the prodigal son. Now this parable has been a favorite of artists throughout the centuries, most notably Rembrandt. But he began. He worked very hard. Finally he showed his work to the missionaries and to the community. There was the father and the younger brother. The look of relief and joy on the face of the father, the expression of sadness and contrition on the face of the son. But as the missionaries stared at the work they noticed something unusual about it. Finally they spoke: "*Something is incorrect here. The shoes are different.*"

The student artist responded: "*Oh no, that is quite correct, that is quite intentional. You see the passage says that when the father saw the son at a distance he was filled with compassion and he ran toward him. He didn't worry about getting a pair of the same shoes. He locates the first two shoes he can find because he loves the*

child so much he wants to reach him as quickly as possible. The fathers' shoes do not match."

God's shoes don't match. In the difficult and essential work of reconciliation, rules are less important than relationship, protocol less important than presence. So a part of reconciliation is communion with God. I had the odd thought recently that some folks picture God as being somewhat like an Olympic Judge. You live your life, you mess up in some way, maybe a slight error in judgment or maybe a wipeout, and there is God holding up a sign that says "disqualified". This is not the God of the Bible who is **gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love**. This is not the God of the story that Jesus tells. This is not the God who runs toward the returning child, this is not the God whose shoes do not match.

The tragic dimension of the story is the older brother who stands apart from the feast, who cannot enjoy the meal or do the difficult work of reconciliation, just yet. A part of reconciliation is communion with each other; the older brother, who has never left home is just as lost as the prodigal who went to distant land.

The God of the Bible desires communion with us. But, as I said last week, there is more. **God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself...and has given us the ministry of reconciliation**. The feast in the story is communion, finally, and a place is set for the entire community, the fatted calf was not just for a family meal, it was a sign and invitation to everyone.

It is a dysfunctional family, it is a broken body, it is a divided community, it is a world at war. So, there is a disadvantage or an advantage of our being here today, you be the judge: we know the truth, the truth about ourselves: we are *made for goodness*, God is not counting our trespasses against us, no matter where we have been, no matter the distance that separates us from God or from each other, we are created for communion.

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation, the old has passed away, see everything has become new. All this is from God who reconciled the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us; we urge you, on behalf of Christ; be reconciled to God.

Sources: Emmanuel Katongale and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things*; James Moore, *Jesus' Parables of Grace*; Desmond Tutu, *Made for Goodness*.