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The Case for Reconciliation

Isaiah 55:1-11

1 Corinthians 10:1-14

Introduction to 1 Corinthians: Paul here is writing to a primarily Gentile church in Corinth. And what he does is a little tough to follow. Paul here applies the history of the people of Israel to these Gentile Christians. For Paul, the story of God's work of salvation in Scripture is one story. So, the Christians in Corinth are reminded that "our ancestors" were led out of slavery in Egypt, led through the wilderness by following the presence of God in a cloud, they were given food and water, they were given the Law of Moses and turned to worship idols of their own making over and over again. And Paul assumes that this history now belongs to us and that God – fully present in Christ – reminds us that just as God gave freedom and blessing and life in the past, so also does God continue to do so now. And, just as God called Israel to complete and total faithful love, so does God now call us to faithful love and obedience.

Do you remember that TV game show called *Let's Make a Deal*? In the show, contestants were given the chance to choose between something they could see and the possibility of a greater prize that was hidden behind a curtain. The whole show hinged on the possibility that what they already had might not be as valuable as what was hidden behind the curtain. But there was no certainty. So, a contestant might trade a new car for a matched set of trashcans if they chose unwisely. But it was all based on chance.

But sometimes life can feel like that game. We all make choices not certain of what the outcomes will be. There is a lot that we do not and cannot control. I think of that often as I read the paper (yes, I still read a paper). In our community are many people who gave their best effort and much of their lives to SCANA and SCE&G only to have the company collapse.

Now, some of those folks are asked to trade what they have for an early retirement plan. Is what is behind curtain #1 better than what they have now? Hard to tell. Feels like chance. And while it is true that we all must make many choices without knowing what the final outcome will be, the choices about who to worship and about our decisions about ultimate values and love are not among those choices with unknown outcomes.

What Paul and the Prophet Isaiah both say to us is that there is one God, and that one God – who created all that is, who calls for our undivided love, who saved Israel from slavery and also allowed Israel to be taken into exile in Babylon – that one God can be trusted and is to be worshiped – alone. Both Isaiah and Paul remind us that it is of ultimate importance that we discern and choose wisely where our love and loyalty lie. The God who created and rules the Universe will not be trifled with. We cannot serve that God AND other gods at the same time.

Of this statement Scripture as a whole is unapologetic and unwavering. So, while we cannot know if the company for which we work will be faithful to us if we are faithful to it, Scripture says that God is always faithful to us. When we are faithful to God the result is life and abundance and joy, but when we are not faithful to God then there is emptiness, hunger and disappointment.

When we first read 1 Corinthians, it sounds like God is a vindictive and lightning bolt-happy God. But, when we go back and read the story of Israel, what we know is that God is not unclear with the people. They are given life, freedom and love, and are reconciled to God and put in right relationship with God. All of that is a gift – given by the God who loves us. THEN, after those free gifts, they are given the Law which serves as a guide for how the people who love God are to live. By keeping the Law, Israel was to show the world that they belonged to God. They become God's people, and God promises to be faithful to them, with the ultimate goal of giving the whole world an example of what faithful love of God looks like. God's whole goal is reconciliation of the whole world to God's own self. Reconciliation with God assumes that the people are in a relationship with God. And the outline of the relationship is not unclear – the requirements and benefits are all spelled out in sometimes excruciating detail. But when the people of Israel are not faithful there are consequences – life and death consequences.

So, it is not an unfair, vindictive God that Paul describes. It is more like a parent who says obey my commands and you will stay safe. There is a cliff around this corner. Do not speed. Do not run over the edge of the cliff. If you do you will be hurt. But, the child, who trusts more in their own wisdom than in the wisdom of the parent, does not listen, goes off the cliff and is hurt.

Their wound is not the parent's fault. The parent is not vindictive or demanding. The parent was in relationship with the child and told the child how to stay in relationship. The child rejected the wisdom and guidance of the parent and so both broke the relationship and hurt him/herself when they fell off the cliff.

Or we could say it is like a marriage. Too many couples assume that the crazy, expensive ceremony of a wedding is all that is required. But it is not the wedding that makes the relationship. The Wedding ceremony is supposed to be the marker or the symbolic beginning of a marriage relationship. The wedding only happens because of the love that the couple share. But the marriage only happens – the relationship only exists – because both partners submit themselves in love to the other. And when one partner does not submit in love, but serves their own purpose first – or serves another relationship at the same time – there are painful consequences. The relationship is broken and pain is the result. Sometimes the break in the relationship is severe enough to kill the marriage. The pain is the result of our own unwillingness to be faithful to the marriage relationship above all other claims on our time, energy and money.

God is the one who formed us from the dust and breathed life into us. It is God's providential care that provides for our needs. We eat, breathe and move only because God has ordained it and given it all to us as a free gift. God calls us into loving and life-giving relationship, and God has explained the consequences and the benefits of such a relationship. The choice is ours.

And Isaiah, Paul and the rest of Scripture has an urgent and consistent message. This is not a game of chance. We DO know what is behind curtain number 1! Do not be confused. To trade our faithful and loving relationship with God for a trip to Barbados or a new car has predictable outcomes and consequences. And when we suffer those consequences, it is not God's fault.

So, Isaiah says, Listen! Go to God so that we can live! Seek God while God may be found! Let go of every idol, temptation or wrong deed that prevents us from being in relationship with God! God is full of mercy and wants to be in relationship with us. Seek that relationship first! Because, God can be trusted and God is faithful. And, God's purpose for the world will happen. It will be accomplished. No chance or luck about it. God's Word "shall accomplish" God's purpose. And the Apostle Paul says, remember our shared history. Simply being baptized and being part of the group does not a relationship make! Baptism marks the beginning of the relationship. But just like a wedding ceremony does not guarantee a faithful, loving marriage, so joining a church or being baptized is only the beginning of learning to love God. We must be

faithful to the relationship. We must love God more than all else. And if we don't then the consequences are not fuzzy or unclear.

Is it tempting to hedge our bets? Yes! Is it tempting to pursue other relationships even while we are married to another? Sure! Is it tempting to think that we can say we worship God alone while we spend most of our time, money and energy pursuing the approval or acceptance of the rulers of this world? Absolutely! But, Paul says, recognize the temptation and remember that God is faithful. When we are faithful, God will give us the strength to remain faithful. We are all tempted. But faithfulness can find a way out of temptation and back into loving, grace-filled, life giving relationship with the only God there is! So, flee from the worship of idols.

Don't be deceived. God is love! God loves you! God has called you into a faithful, life-giving relationship that is eternal. Nothing else – no other god – can promise eternal love now and always. What God has already give us in the person of Jesus Christ is now and always more valuable and life giving than ANYTHING behind curtain #1.