

The Scandal of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

The Apostle Paul talks a lot about reconciliation and grace. And the Christian Church has continued in his tradition to use the words so much that we probably rarely even hear them any longer. Grace, Sin, Reconciliation, Forgiveness, Salvation . . . all words that are normal language in church, but words that rarely show up in our normal vocabulary. Paul writes, “in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses/sins against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 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.”

God. Reconciled. Sin. Christians talk a lot about these things, and you expect me to speak them. But, these words have lost their shock value for us, and perhaps no longer even mean anything to us. We expect preachers and over the top zealous Christians to use these words. They don't have a regular place in our day-to-day vocabulary and have become “church” words. But we have forgotten how scandalous they are. We have forgotten their shock value. IN fact, they seem like good, kind, noble sentiments, right up until we think about what they really mean. Let me see if I can help.

I am so old! [HOW OLD ARE YOU?!]

I am so old that I typed all of my college English papers on an electric typewriter. Back in the day we wrote out our papers in longhand (another old word for handwritten) and then, once we had written it, then we typed it! And, I remember how it felt to get to the bottom of the page and realize that I had made a mistake (either in spacing or once I typed the same sentence twice because it was way too late at night for clear thought). At that point, the page had to be typed again.

I am so old that I was in seminary/graduate school before I got my first word processor – it could have been called a computer, but there was no internet back then – so it was really a glorified typewriter. It was so big that it took up most of the back seat of my Datsun B210, which caused a crisis in values because it was competing with my stereo for free space at that point. Stereos also used to be huge. But, the word processor won over even the stereo, because there was the miraculous thing about my word processor! On a word processor, one could type a whole paper, then go back and re-read it and CHANGE any mistakes before printing the paper. If you are younger than 40, I'm not sure you can appreciate the mind-blowing shift that created. All errors could be corrected with a keystroke or two! Titles could be centered on the page without marking the middle of the page, counting the characters and figuring out where to begin typing the line to ensure that it would be centered. After the

advent of the word processor, one could type a line and then highlight it and hit one command key and the whole line would be centered on the page. Mind blowing!

From that point on, I saw no term paper from a typewriter's point of view, even though I once saw every paper from that point of view. From that point on, I saw every paper from the point of view of someone who had a word processor.

What Paul here proclaims about God and humanity is either mind-blowing, earth changing Gospel, or it is foolish and crazy talk. And until we get that, we have not understood what Paul is saying.

Paul tells us that once we know that God come to earth in human form, our view of God, ourselves and others can never be the same. He tells us that the goal of the Christian life is to be able to see from God's vantage, rather than seeing from our human vantage. Unless our love for God and obedience to Christ changes how we see, act and live, it is not the Gospel and is a waste of our time.

If our lives are consumed by the view from our vantage point alone, then Paul here offends us. If we think only as unreconciled humans, we say things like: Do I like him/her? Do I agree with them? They are not like us. If he/she does that again, I am going to blow up. I can't stand to be around them. All of those statements reflect only our view from our own ego-center.

What Paul says is that God offers us is a completely different way of viewing reality. Do you remember the first time you ever went up in a plane? We got into the plane on a worldly level and all the world looked very familiar. Then, the plane went up into the air and suddenly what was our whole world was revealed to be only a small green speck in a vast, and heretofore unimaginable world.

The Apostle Paul says that God has taken us – as we are – and lined us up, or reconciled us, so that we can be conformed to God. And when we are conformed or reconciled to God, we are changed completely. Then, we can see as we have never seen before.

Notice the direction of the motion, because that is ALL IMPORTANT. Paul says that in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. We are changed and reconciled to God. God is not reconciled to us. It's not like God says, let's just compromise and meet in the middle. God is truth. God is life. God is love. And we are either reconciled to God – conformed to God's standard – or we are still seeing from our own ground-level point of view.

God sees us, knows us, recognizes our faults, sins, unreconciled lives, and fixes it all. The reconciliation/ the re-formation is a GIFT that we did nothing to earn and can do nothing to deserve. God refused to count our evil deeds and Sin against us and decided to call us righteous and loved, because God loves us. It is not fair. In fact, it is sort of crazy. Or it is truth? Or it is Gospel?

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The hard to believe, what are the odds, could it be true message of the Gospel is that God's purpose for us and for the world is for us to return home and be willing to receive – gratis – even though we don't deserve it – a hero's welcome. From an ego-centric level, this is just not fair. From the vantage of our human nature, it is not even good news (witness the Older Brother). But from God's vantage, everyone is welcome to come home, to take up again – no matter what we have done – no matter how far from home we have strayed – to take up our God created position as beloved and valued Child of God.

Before I finish, I want to point out to you four dangers or ditches into which the Christian Church sometimes veers when we talk about being reconciled to God.

First, there is a danger of forgetting that in order to be reconciled to God WE must return home. The Father did not go to the far country to force the younger brother home. In fact, the mark of the Gospel and the way God works is always in ways that preserve our free will and enable us to choose. Love is not forced. Love is received as soon as we say, "we should go home. Maybe, God will still love me if I return." So, to be reconciled to God it is WE who must change; we who must change direction; we who must return to God. We must be made over in the image of Christ. We must give up our ego-centric view, our self-justification and our insistence on our own rights. We give it all up, let go of all excuses or reasons, and we choose to accept God's love and be changed forever. This is why it is critical for Christians to listen to the faithful stories of recovery that addicts can tell. We must learn the hope and life and reconciliation that come ONLY after we have given all the rest up. We must be changed in order to be reconciled to God. There is no other way.

Second, we must be changed into God's image. There are Christian Churches who will tell us that unless we agree with them, we have not been saved, reconciled or welcomed home. That is like the people in Colorado saying, "Our view of the world is the correct one. See these mountains? This is how the whole world looks." And the people of Florida arguing with them by saying, "No, OUR view of the world is correct. The whole world looks like everglades and beach." To be reconciled to God means that we will be able to see the world, ourselves and others in a completely different way. It is the difference between viewing the earth from our own doorstep and seeing the world from an airplane window or from space. Be very suspicious of those who say that we must agree with them for God to love us.

Third, Christians often forget that once we have been reconciled to God, the very job description requires that we go out into the world to appeal to others. Ambassadors ALWAYS serve outside of their native country. As ambassadors for Christ, we must go out among those who do not yet know that they are missed at home. We cannot stay at home and do our jobs. Once we have been changed, the good news of the welcome can't stay inside the walls of this building. Once we have been changed, then we realize how wide and deep and vast is God's purpose and how inclusive it is. "For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the whole world might be saved through him." (Jn 3:17)

Fourth, to be reconciled to God does not mean that we will be suddenly perfect. Sometimes, Christians can be hard to get along with. The Church would be much easier without any Christian in it. But, we are not reconciled to God because we are perfect. We are reconciled by Christ precisely because we are imperfect and cannot do it by ourselves. Over time, when we give up our ego-centric view in pursuit of a God-centric view, we are changed. But we are never perfect – at least this side of death so far as I can tell. Don't expect yourself or anyone else to be perfect. Expect them and us to be forgiven, reconciled and grateful. Reconciliation is a gift – an undeserved, mind-blowing gift! Really, it is a scandal.