

Reconciliation in Broken Times

Psalm 31:1-5
II Corinthians 5:16-21

I remember exactly where I was. If you are over the age of 30 you do, too. I lay at home, sick in bed. My administrative assistant called me. “Turn on the TV,” she said, and hung up. The north tower was burning. The second airplane had not yet hit the south tower. At that moment the talking heads on whatever network I had on did not know what had happened. They had not yet located video of the airplanes hitting the buildings. Though the percentage of drivel to actual information was frustrating I spent the next several hours—just as you did—welded to the television. Once the shape of the whole plot became apparent one question dominated: why? Who did it and why? What could cause such intense hatred?

The answer was and is, religion. The millenia-long conflict between Islam and Christianity is the root of the problem. Of course, this simplification omits critical components of the problem like the geopolitics of the Middle East, the influence of Russia and China and Iran, competing visions for economic and governing systems and more. But at the heart, this is about religion. And note the use of the present tense. William Seo, the Korean-American Army veteran who has taught and equipped Afghani women to operate their own tailoring businesses, reported this week that **every** person in-country with whom he has had contact in the past two weeks—a

number he estimates at over fifty—has immediately reverted to living outwardly according to the strictest interpretation of Sharia law. They understand it may not protect them forever from the Taliban, but it is the smart play. This is about religion.

Or perhaps we need to peel back one more layer of the onion in order to understand what drives this war. Christian theology identifies the truth about us that makes the hatred that leads to using airplanes (them) and drones (us) to kill innocent civilians: sinful human nature. David purportedly wrote Psalm 31. Scholars argue over what inspired him to do so. The revered translator and scholar Mitchell Dahood believes it was recovery from a mortal illness. The equally respected Kenneth Bailey says it was betrayal by a trusted friend. No matter, the Psalm illustrates human nature equally well in either case. If it were illness, then David's self-absorption does him little credit. If it were a betrayal, it discredits whoever turned on him.

Regardless, David makes it clear that his only rescue must come from God. “Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily,” he writes, “be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.” He speaks of escaping the net hidden for him, conjuring the image of a hunter's snare, camouflaged and baited. A crushingly high percentage of social media posts are nothing less than nets, camouflaged and baited. Often we read of people being “owned” and “destroyed”. But as Ecclesiastes reminds us, there is nothing new under the sun. No doubt the hieroglyphics of Egypt contain “owns” and “destructions”. Read II Samuel and you will find many instances of the same happening to David—and by him to his opponents.

But if by our very nature we are driven to wage war, whether actual warfare carried on by soldiers, or flame wars online, or wherever and however, how can we break the cycle of owns and destructions? David gives us our answer: only by the grace and power of God can we transcend our brokenness. Paul, the author of the letter to Corinthian Christians from which we read today, agrees. He grounds his thought in the concept of being “in Christ”. This phrase appears throughout his writings in the New Testament. For Paul being in Christ means having entered into a relationship with Jesus Christ that has effected a fundamental change in us. Our faith in the risen Christ kick-starts a theological progression acted out in our lives. It initiates the process of sanctification, by which we become more and more like the sinless Jesus.

“So if anyone is in Christ,” Paul writes, “there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.” Paul claims here that as a part of this transformation our sinful nature loses power over us. Though we remain sinners (Paul calls himself chief among sinners), when we enter into communion with God in Christ we become more like Jesus. Walter Bruggeman, the wonderful retired professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, put it this way at a seminar I attended there only a year before 9/11: “It is just one of those holy mysteries. I know I am still Walt, the crusty academic jealous of my prerogatives and overly sensitive to perceived arguments with my stellar scholarship. Yet I am also Walt, beloved of my wife, respected by my peers and students, forgiven by my savior. Now I have a perspective unattainable by my own paltry powers.”

In our passage from II Corinthians Paul gives a concrete example of how sanctification manifests itself in real time and space: reconciliation. He writes, "All this (the new creation caused by being in Christ) is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and who has given us the ministry of reconciliation" Reconciliation is the restoration of broken or wounded relationships. As commentator Murray Harris puts it, "Reconciliation is not some polite ignoring or reduction of hostility but its total and objective removal." The Roman Catholic diocese of Gaylord, in Northern Michigan, aired a commercial that showed brothers meeting to talk for the first time in twenty years. Some unspecified conflict had separated them that whole time. The tag line, at the very end, was, "Reconciliation is what happens after you find the courage to come face to face." Paul, writing to congregations experiencing internal conflict, must whole-heartedly agree. And in Christ, he would add, it is possible.

"So we are ambassadors for God," Paul concludes. "We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." So many of us feel disconnected, from God and from others. This is a mournful tragedy, as God has made it clear we were made for relationship. Genesis 2 tells us one reason God even created us was to enter into communion with us. It would appear we need to become more intentional about our relationships as well: with God, with our Muslim brothers and sisters, with our churches, with our communities. But how would that look?

It would look like our Episcopalian colleagues celebrating communion with us today in, essentially, the Presbyterian manner. You have legitimate theological

reasons not to do so; we do not believe the same things about what we are ingesting. Yet by the grace of God you have come today with the intent of joining in the sacrament. **That** is reconciliation

It would look like our nation accepting thousands of Afghani refugees who have fled from those who, though they share a religion, would torture and kill them. In a time when so many have grave concerns about the leaky sieve that has become our southern border, **that** is reconciliation

It would look like injured friendships healing, Red and Blue states admitting that purple is a perfectly acceptable hue, even nations with historical grievances setting them aside. And while those of a more pragmatic nature might snort at such possibilities, in Christ everything is possible.

At the time of my ordination in 1985, the ecumenical movement was still hot. Christian leaders held conferences, wrote papers and books, held trainings at council meetings: all to encourage cooperation between the churches. I did my part. I married a Lutheran. But as I have said many times, you can take a person out of the Lutheran Church, but you cannot take the Lutheran Church entirely out of the person. The ecumenical movement—the attempt to find ways to cooperate and to find common ground biblically and theologically—has its limits. The point gets made by the very name itself. Ecumenical comes from the Greek word oikoumene. In Koine, biblical, Greek oikoumene means “the whole house” or “the whole world”. Thus, the

ecumenical movement sought to create a tent so big we could all fit inside. But in classical Greek oikoumene means “all lands inhabited by Greeks.” Put another way, it means “all lands **not** inhabited by barbarians.”

For years now we have seen a relentless amplification of voices which label those with whom they disagree the equivalent of barbarians. For years the ecumenical movement has faded farther into the background of church world. This is neither inevitable nor desirable. Holypalooza is a stake driven into the sidewalks of 7th St. that claims otherwise. Though the differences that separate Episcopalians, Methodists and Presbyterians are narrower than those that divide Afghanistan and America, they are nevertheless not minor. Historically, those differences have been not only theological, but also economic and political. Today, those differences seem smaller. Why should we not build upon that? Can these three congregations join together in ministry? And can we not engage the students served by United Campus Ministries? St. Stephan's how might we help with Manna from Seven?

The longer I do this the more critical I see ecumenism to be. It fits with another need I see: unity within congregations. Not unanimity. Not mindless, powerless acquiescence. Unity. The union of people trying to follow Jesus. Because doing that is hard enough without adding conflict. Followers of Jesus: in Christ be reconciled to God and to one another.