

RECONCILIATION AS HEALING

A Sermon by Ross Langmead
Westgate Baptist Community, 10 am 17 July 2005
2 Corinthians 5:11-20

[Extract from “Faith”, by Brian Doyle, *The Sunday Age*, 17-7-05]

Committed a sin yesterday, in the hallway, at noon. I roared at my son. I grabbed him by the shirt collar, I frightened him so badly that he cowered and wept, and when he turned to run I grabbed him by the arm so roughly that he flinched. And it was that flicker of fear and pain across his face, the bright, eager, holy riveting face I have loved for ten years, that stopped me then and haunts me this morning. For I am the father of his fear, I sent it snarling into his heart, and I can never get it out now.

Yes, he was picking on his brother, and yes he had picked on his brother all morning, and yes, this was the culmination of many edgy incidents already. And no, he hadn't paid the slightest attention to warnings and remonstrations and fulminations.

But still, I roared at him and grabbed him and terrified him and made him cower, and now there is a dark, evil wriggle between us that makes me sit here with my hands over my face, ashamed to the bottom of my bones...

The instant I let go of my son's sinewy arm in the hallway he sprinted away and slammed the door, and I stood there simmering in shame. Then I walked out of the house and down the hill into the laurel thicket as dense and silent as the dawn of the world and found him there sobbing. We sat for a long time, not saying anything. Finally, I asked quietly for his forgiveness, and he asked for mine, and we walked out of the woods changed men.

INTRODUCTION

I'd like to reflect for a few minutes on the healing power of reconciliation. Reconciliation is a long word, but it has a simple meaning: becoming friends again. Reconciliation means a restored relationship—well, not exactly the same as used to be before it was broken, but a new friendship. It is the making of peace. It involves justice but goes beyond justice to friendship.

Our Bible reading today, from 2 Corinthians 5, makes the staggering claim that those who open themselves up to the reconciling power of Jesus Christ are made new.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor 5:17)

I could focus on the new friendship between us and God when we are converted, when we turn to God. But I'm not going to.

I could also focus on reconciliation between groups and between nations. This is highly relevant this week as we've watched terror striking people on trains and buses in London and heard about more violence in Iraq. How will the Christian West and the more radical parts of the Muslim world ever make friends again? I urge us all to pray for peace and justice, to speak words of calm and non-violence and to patiently build for the day when reconciliation may be possible between nations and between those of different religions. But I'm not going to focus on this either.

I could also look at reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous people in Australia, one of our greatest moral challenges.

All these things are aspects of reconciliation.

RECONCILIATION IN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

But I invite you to think, instead, about the healing power of reconciliation in personal relationships — about the miracle of healing that occurs when God enables us to overcome conflict and hatred between us and our family, or between us and our friends, between us and our colleagues, and between us and people we have to deal with in everyday life.

Conflict, by the way, is a normal part of human life, even Christian community. Anyone who has been close to others knows this!

We have known serious conflict here at Westgate. In late 1996 one of our pastors disagreed with the way the deacons were acting, and suddenly friendships were broken, a Baptist Union panel was set up to mediate, people heard different stories, the pastor resigned hurt, some people left Westgate, and we narrowly avoided splitting down the middle. Because most of it was confidential, the average member never really understood what it was all about, except that for some time our mission and our ministry suffered, as we licked our wounds, as our leaders were deeply hurt on all sides.

The bad side of that conflict is that some people left and others couldn't work through their hurt because they didn't know the full story — it had to be dealt with confidentially and sensitively. Some of us still bear the emotional scars of that time. Some of us may still be unreconciled—I don't know. We will never be the same.

The good side of this whole thing is that many of those whose friendships were badly broken later met and talked it through and were reconciled. As a community we worked through things in some depth, and prayed and forgave and stayed together. For a while we were like a bird that couldn't fly, but our commitment to reconciliation meant that the wounds have largely healed, and people who once couldn't talk to each other are friends again.

This example shows that when reconciliation occurs, healing occurs. Part of the wholeness of being healed people is the restoration of relationships. If you have ever 'not talked' to anyone or had anyone 'not talk' to you, you'll know how deeply it affects you both.

PEACEMAKING IS CENTRAL

I have come to believe that peacemaking, in all of its dimensions, is not just important for Christians, but is the centre of the gospel. Peacemaking, or reconciliation, is God's mission and God's good news, and therefore it is good news to us and it's the good news we pass on to others in turn. Our Bible passage says that just as God has been reconciling the world to Godself, God has also given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-19). So, peacemaking is the heart of God's mission. We will become new people as we become friends again with God and with others; and our task is, like Paul's, to be servants of this gospel. Are you ready for this call? Am I ready for it?

It amounts to a new reality, a state of healing. As 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation". Verse 16 encourages us to see people through different eyes, no longer according to human standards. We sometimes feel like saying, "They did this to me, and I'll never forgive them". I heard one American leader say after 9/11, "God may have mercy, but we will have no mercy!". But this passage calls us to a new perspective on daily life, one that is open to the reconciliation that God works in our lives. Central ideas such as forgiveness, mercy and loving our enemies are what makes Christian faith so radical, so challenging, and so transformative.

In this passage Paul calls us to a ministry of reconciliation in everything we do. Following in the footsteps of Jesus, we are to bring about reconciliation in our very bodies, in our daily lives, costly though it may be. As I said, this is exciting but hugely challenging. I immediately think of times when I have found it so difficult to say sorry to Alison, or front up to a person who has wronged me and tell them that I am letting it go.

EXAMPLE: MY FATHER AND ME

Let me give you another example of the healing power of reconciliation.

My father and I never got on when I was young. It seemed to be the classic situation. To me, he was socially conservative, religiously fundamentalist and as a parent authoritarian. I was in protest, an angry young man. You name it, from music to politics to religion to the clothes I wore and the beard I grew — we clashed on everything. I left the Salvation Army, where he was an officer, and he openly talked about me for a long time as the black sheep. We remained civil, and he loved me intensely, and I was the dutiful oldest son, but I resented his ways, and after I married, every time Alison and I came home from visiting my parents Alison would have to help me debrief and calm down.

I was thirty-five years old before I decided to seek reconciliation. I decided not to try any more to change him, but to understand and forgive him. I arranged a series of lunches together down at St Kilda beach near where he worked, and said I wanted to hear about his childhood and his adult life. I planned carefully how I would invite him. I said, "I feel as if I've been estranged from you since my teen years, as if we're too different to get on, but I'd like to get to know you adult to adult, and to do it by hearing about your life story."

What happened was amazing and deeply moving. It was like opening the floodgates. Dad talked and we wept and laughed, and I understood his vulnerabilities and fears, and his regrets and his passions. He told me of skeletons in his cupboard which none of my brothers and sisters knew. He embraced me and thanked me, and from then on, never

tried to control me any more. All I knew as I entered this process was that I wanted reconciliation and was prepared to accept him as he was. This turned out to be a special gift to my father, one which I now understand as a father myself. I found that as a son I was free. We were still very different from each other, but the emotional channels were not blocked. As the Corinthians passage puts it, there was a new creation. A significant healing took place. There was a liberation. When Dad died ten years ago, I felt at peace. Restored relationship really does bring life and healing.

NEEDED IN OUR CHURCHES AND INDAILYLIFE

It should be obvious that this gift of reconciliation is badly needed within our churches. We're Baptists, so we know all about fighting. We can be a pretty fractious lot. We are having to learn tolerance, patience, humility and some of the skills of conflict transformation. Our leaders, such as Alan Marr and Anne Wilkinson-Hayes, have recently produced some excellent material called *Fit4Life*, which recognises that Baptist churches often need help. Historic peace churches such as the Mennonites are teaching us a great deal on the practical level too.

The ministry of reconciliation is also needed in daily life, whether in our families, workplaces or circle of friends. We Christians can have a real healing ministry here, in encouraging people to talk to each other instead of cutting others off or resorting to a fist fight. We may seek training in listening, in counseling, or in conflict resolution. We may simply be steady and gentle friends. Or we may exercise the quiet and mystery-laden ministry of prayer for reconciliation.

I would like to make two concluding points about the miracle of healing that is reconciliation. First, it is a paradoxical mixture of God's initiative and our openness. And second, it is often a long and costly process, which may not reach complete resolution until God comes in fullness.

1 IT IS GOD'S GIFT TO US

First, we are only able to experience and share the healing power of reconciliation because God offers it to us, and yet we are called to consciously act as peacemakers.

Our passage says, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to Godself through Christ" (2 Cor 5:18). It is because God sets things right within us that we then express that new reality amongst each other and the wider world, as co-workers with God. It starts with God, through Jesus Christ. This is a gift which we share, not just an ethic we try to live up to.

For some of us, this gift of being reconciled with God happens in worship, or in our own devotional life. Others might discover it in therapy or in a loving relationship where the other person mirrors God's unconditional acceptance of us. I urge you to seek these healing waters, and to expect and claim the gift of growing wholeness. The whole of Christian community and Christian mission is based on Christians actually experiencing the healing Spirit of God in our lives. We can fake it only so long. Peacemaking begins between us and God, and as a consequence, between the split parts of us deep within. Reconciliation is wholeness, is restoration, is personal growth, is creativity expressed, and so on.

2 IT IS A LONG, COSTLY AND PARTIAL PROCESS

My second concluding comment is that reconciliation is often a long and costly process, which may not reach complete resolution until God comes in fullness. If you have experienced the damage caused by a severely broken relationship you will know what I mean.

I have spent a fair bit of time recently listening to and talking to a friend who, in his forties, is still in deep conflict with his mother. He believes she rejected him as a baby and rejects him now because he is gay. He is often deeply depressed and has been suicidal. He recently accused her of these things, and his accusations have deeply upset his mother as well. She has been in tears on the phone to me. They want to be reconciled, but their understanding is still a long way apart. Some healing has begun, but the wounds are still deep and open.

Sometimes only one party seeks reconciliation and we have to live with the fact that the other side is not interested. But partial healing is still possible. Sometimes we take two steps forward and one step back. But we have moved forward. Reconciliation can occur in a single transaction but is often a difficult, ongoing and incomplete process. Our hope as Christians is that God's reign of transforming love will come in fullness, and we will be fully reconciled.

Meanwhile, in 2 Corinthians 5 we are invited to taste the new creation. Through the Spirit of Christ, this healing power is already active amongst us. We are invited to both experience the overcoming of alienation within ourselves and to share it with others in the ministry of reconciliation.

The journey of reconciliation is worth every step we take. Whether it is in our personal relationships or in speaking words of calm in the current world crisis, be encouraged. Remember the words of Jesus, recorded in Matthew 5: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God."

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