



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**Be Reconciled**  
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*So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:23-24).*

“You have heard it said, ‘You shall not murder,’ but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister you will be liable ....” Jesus has a way of getting to the heart of the matter because he sees all the way into the hearts of us.

Most of us can manage not to murder. That’s not too hard a thing to avoid. But not harboring anger or bitterness or resentment against anyone? That’s another matter altogether. The truth is, some people just really annoy us. Maybe we don’t like what they believe or the way they behave. Sometimes the things people do offend us directly. Sometimes they even hurt us, emotionally if not physically.

When that happens we’re tempted to harbor hostility, aren’t we? Unlike murder, which has a kind of revulsion built into it and serious penalties for doing it, anger and resentment can be oddly attractive – which is why we’re tempted to cling to them. There’s something about righteous indignation that’s appealing. Some people just seem to enjoy being angry; it energizes them. Other people find a peculiar consolation in seeing themselves as victims and that becomes part of their identity. And of course there’s a sense of moral superiority that we get when we confess other people’s sins instead of our own.

Whatever the reasons we cultivate anger and resentment, Jesus says we need to stop it. We need to give

that up, not only because it can lead to bigger problems but because we were made to love our neighbors as ourselves, and nothing gets in the way of love like anger.

We Christians believe in a God who goes to astonishing lengths for the sake of reconciliation. Paul marvels at that when he says, “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” God doesn’t wait for us to get our act together and stop sinning before God loves us. Instead, the Creator reaches out to us creatures and sacrifices himself for us even before we know we need it. Paul finds this love of God amazing: “Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

Through the sacrificial death of Jesus you and I are reconciled to God. Christians claim that Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins, and that’s certainly true, though not in the way that people sometimes describe it. Some Christians talk about Jesus’ death as if the Son had to die to appease the Father’s anger—which makes God the Father seem guilty of the same uncontrolled wrath that Jesus warns us against. But a deeply Trinitarian understanding of God sees that it’s not like that at all. If there really are two natures in Jesus, so that he is fully God and fully human, then in the suffering and death of Christ God takes the sins of the world upon himself in order to reconcile us to God.

If you think about how forgiveness and reconciliation work in our ordinary relationships, that begins to make sense, doesn’t it? If someone offends you and you want to be reconciled to that person, there is still a price to be paid, an injury borne by someone that has to be set aside. In

Christ the sins of the world are borne by God, not for God to harbor anger and resentment against us, but in order to bury our sins in the tomb of Christ so that when he rises again all those sins are left behind.

If our Creator goes to such great lengths to be reconciled to us, who are we not to seek reconciliation with one another? Who has offended us more deeply than we offend God by the things we do and the things we fail to do? And yet God forgives us. That's why Jesus, who came for the very purpose of reconciling us to God, says that if we're going to be right with God we need to be right with one another. He says, if you bring your offering to God and remember that someone has something against you, go and be reconciled with that person first, and then come and make your offering to God.

Now some people think that seeking reconciliation is a sign of weakness, that being strong means never budging from your position. But that's not true at all. Is God weak? Is the Maker of heaven and earth, the power behind all creation, weak because God wants to be reconciled with us? No, the truth is that seeking reconciliation can be a sign of strength. People may bluster and pretend that intransigence is strength, when in fact they are too spiritually weak to work for reconciliation. Pride pretends to be powerful, but it's often just a mask to hide insecurity.

Seeking reconciliation is a sign of strength, not weakness, and for that very reason it's not the same thing as tolerating abuse or bad behavior. People in abusive relationships need to stand up to the abuser, and make it clear that abuse will not be tolerated, and be prepared to leave the relationship if it doesn't stop. The same strength

that lets us work for reconciliation also makes us unwilling to accept bad behavior.

That's true for conflicts between groups of people or between nations, too. God would have us seek the things that make for peace, but not at the price of accepting injustice. Right now the world is aghast at the atrocities committed by groups like the Islamic State and Boko Haram. Some of their actions are evil, and they need to be stopped – by force if necessary.

People need to be able to live together, which means that we all have to share basic norms of decency and respect for the rights of others. In the long run, the goal for all our relationships is reconciliation based on mutual love and respect. But getting from here to there means setting boundaries on bad behavior and maintaining those boundaries in ways that create the conditions for peace and reconciliation to thrive.

There are extreme situations where violence has to be stopped before the work of reconciliation can begin. But for most of us, in our personal relationships with family and friends and in our life together as a society, there is room for reaching out to reduce conflict and work toward the things that make for peace. These days our society is full of factions steeped in self-righteousness and intransigence, and it's not serving us well. Often we find out that we're not so different after all, when we take time to listen to one another and see things from the other person's perspective. And while we're working to find common ground we need to find the grace and strength to treat one another well and maintain the bonds of community, even when we disagree.

Jesus makes it clear that God expects no less from us. The God who comes to reconcile us in Christ wants us to be reconciled to one another. Jesus says we cannot claim the grace and peace and forgiveness of God for ourselves unless we also extend grace and peace and forgiveness to one another. We can't control how others will respond, but we can try to do what's right ourselves, because that's what the Lord requires of us.





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