March 31st , 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Fourth Sunday In Lent

The Ministry of Reconciliation

I. To Be Reconciled

The active verb ‘reconciliation’ is used four times, solely by the apostle Paul – twice in the letter to the Romans and twice in his letters to the Corinthians. When we understand the word ‘reconcile’ in our modern vernacular, it is either to ‘reconcile to numbers or ledger lines in a banking transaction’ or in our case, reconciliation is to ‘remove enmity between foes.’ But actually, as we see in our passage today, it is more than that – it is a change that occurs inside us and is seen radiating through and from us as we participate in the world.

Many a scholar has written a book on reconciliation. Just in a sweeping look at books on Amazon, there are over 2,000 books written about reconciliation in some shape or form. There are significant reasons we have so many books and articles written on the topic: reconciliation is hard work, it requires vulnerability, and to really get to a definition of what reconciliation is – well, it’s tough. Reconciliation is more than forgiveness. Reconciliation is what we see Christ doing during this Lenten season, we see Christ taking our sins upon himself and creating us as new beings, aligned by grace to God.

It sounds nice, and profound, and theologically apt – but it still begs the question: for you and me, today - here and now in Lent, what does it mean to be reconciled? For me, in my own exploration of the word, I see three ways of looking at reconciliation: reconciling ourselves with others, reconciling ourselves to *ourselves*, and most importantly, reconciling ourselves to God.

II. Reconciliation with Others

The Lenten season is filled with opportunities for penitence – for apologies, for a chance to renew our relationship by admitting our faults and accepting our failures. Lent is a time in which we recognize that if we are to accept that we are fully and wholly God’s children, then we have to recognize that others are God’s children too.

This, admittedly, is one of the hardest commands that God puts on my heart. While that may not sound appealing coming from your pastor, as it turns – I’m human, I’m very human. I, alike most people, do not enjoy the vulnerability that comes with saying, ‘I’m sorry’ and naming why. I do it, to the best of my ability, but I do not enjoy it.

It is vulnerable to not only ask your neighbor for forgiveness, but to reconcile. In forgiveness, I forgive you, you forgive me, and we can walk away from one another and all is said and done. To reconcile with you means I not only forgive you, but I learn how to build a relationship with you again. It is to say – I know what you did, I know what I did – where do we both go from here to live together in a healthy and loving environment.

Forgiveness can be an independent activity – I can look upon the bully who was mean to me in middle school and say – I forgive, I do not forget, but that experience does not have a hold on me anymore. I release myself from that feeling and experience. I do not need someone else to apologize, I can choose to live differently without hearing an apology. This is particularly helpful when someone has died and there’s been resentment – they do not need to come back from the grave, but the way their actions tore you and me down – in forgiveness, they do not have a hold on us anymore.

Reconciliation is forgiveness plus – it is a two-party transaction. Reconciliation is the ideal that comes from forgiveness – it is forgiveness, plus learning to live together in a different harmony. Reconciliation can be a beautiful and wonderful experience where the children of God get a renewed opportunity for new life.

The disclaimer I must add though, is that while reconciliation is the ideal, it is not always the reality. Sometimes reconciliation is not safe – for those who are abused, for those who are hurting, for those who live in toxic relationships – the pastoral advisement is that reconciliation may not be healthy. Forgiveness can happen, but there are places in this life, in our vulnerable and human transgressions, where reconciliation is not possible on this side of the veil of life.

II. To Reconcile with myself

Not only am I called to reconcile with my neighbor, but I am also called to reconcile with myself. Which sounds a little strange, but go along with me here. Who is your worst critic – the person who says, ‘you are not enough, that could have been better, you should have tried harder’? It’s you – more often than not – we are our own worst critics. We judge ourselves harshly, we try to outdo ourselves, and we can be fairly mean to ourselves in our head.

It’s like the old visual of the angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other – where your personal angel is vying for you, telling you that everything’s great and the devil on the other shoulder who is telling you that it’s all your fault. It depends who you are and where you are at in this life journey, but I think we can all resonate with that image at one time or another.

To forgive ourselves is not to shift blame, but if we have truly done something wrong, to take ownership of it. And in that forgiveness, we reconcile ourselves to....ourselves – we look at the past, see ourselves as forgiven, and say that since we are forgiven, we are a new creation called to new ways of life and new ways of being.

III. Reconciling Ourselves to God

So, in order to reconcile ourselves to God – we really need a handle on the first and second parts of reconciliation – the reconciling of our neighbours and ourselves. God has always had grace for us, yet we have been a people unwilling to receive it. And now, in Lent, we come face to face with the realities of our ancestors and our own choices – our choice to live in sin, to break covenants, and to rely on the idols of comfort. In Lent, we come to terms with ourselves – that Jesus had to walk this road, be challenged by authorities, and crucified for the weight of our sin. Jesus put that burden on his back and continues to do so, so that we are saved.

When we reconcile ourselves with God, we not only say in our prayer of confession – forgive us for the ways in which we have sinned – but we also seek that reconciling moment, the moment that says – renew us, restore us, remake us into the people you have called us to be. Make us into your new creation – and every time, every single time we do that, God’s grace interjects and says, ‘You are my beloved and forgiven, still, and always.’

IV. Reconciliation on All Fronts

So, the challenge this week is very simple indeed – this week, I invite you to reconcile yourself with others, yourself, and God. No problem, right?

Okay, maybe it’s a bit harder than that – maybe reconciling ourselves in a life long task at hand that we continue to strive towards. But as we sit in this Lenten season, may this desire for reconciliation dwell within you and may you find ways in your own life to make that reconciliation a real and viable reality. May you know that the God of grace and mercy abides with you as we seek this ministry of reconciliation as we walk this Lenten road. Amen.