

March 28, 2004

"HUNGERING FOR FORGIVENESS"

2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Matthew 18:15-20

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Remember the conflict surrounding the arrest and beating of Rodney King a few years ago? A video camera caught the police beating King and the shocking incident quickly was broadcast around the world. Subsequently, the police officers who beat King were acquitted and a riot broke out in Los Angeles.

Rodney King's comment on the riots was probably the wish of many of us, "Why can't we just all get along?" King spoke for millions of people who fervently wish conflict in the world would end. Why can't people just get over past wrongs, leave old wounds behind, let bygones be bygones? Why don't nations, tribes and clans just declare peace and be done with the violence?

Well, life's not that simple is it? Conflict often runs very deep and lies deep in the collected memory of peoples, tribes and nations. Old conflicts and new ones are usually accompanied by resentment, grudges held for centuries and long nurtured hate. Well meaning people can't just declare peace and many, if not most, people can't just get over it and move on.

It's sad but true, even simple conflicts get complicated in a hurry. I remember when my friend John's daughter was in the middle of adolescent rebellion. I forget what the issue was, but asked John if Stephie was doing alright. "No," John said, "she's too committed to her anger."

That's the way life is very often. Some conflict leads to alienation. We get committed to the alienation. Then we adjust the facts of life to support our side of the conflict. We no longer can hear the truth, even see things the way they are. We're too committed to our alienation to have an honest conversation.

We live in an adversarial and alienated world. We divide over most everything. Nations, races, tribes, genders, regions divide against each other, become committed to the conflict and interpret life to support our point of view.

I've heard well-meaning, very nice Minnesotans hear a southern accent and declare the person is stupid. I've lived in the south and heard the work "Yankee" used as less than a compliment. And that's a rather mild regional alienation.

White House insiders are quietly saying that Iraq will likely end up three nations not one, divided along ethnic, tribal and religious differences. It seems we humans will find something to fight about.

Closer to home alienation strikes most families. Recently I talked to man who made peace with his father after 35 years of alienation. He laments those lost years. His father is getting old and this man doesn't want his father to die his adversary. Sadly, the man told me his brother continues to hate their father and refuses to make peace. Guess which brother is happy and which is sad? That's the way alienation works.

Friendships break, too. We've been reading reports about the newly released private papers of former Supreme Justice William Blackman. He and former Chief Justice Warren Burger were childhood friends who ended up on the Supreme Court. But during their work on the high court they disagreed on an issue and their friendship ended. They seldom spoke to each other toward the end. How sad. Here we are talking about the tragedy years later.

Alienation strikes churches, too. One of my early memories of church is the Wednesday night my parents made me stay home from a church meeting. They knew what was going to happen. The church was divided over some issue. Opinions were voiced, accusations made and insults hurled. Before the church meeting was over several hundred people got up and walked out to start another church.

Years later my dad took me out to lunch and, to my surprise, told how deeply he was hurt by that event. I don't think he ever got quite over it. Alienation hurts.

I've been pastor of three churches marked by deep division and alienation. In two of them the church fired the pastor – Colonial is one of them. In the other, the pastor led half the church out of a church meeting. They slammed the door behind them and started a new church. Those remaining often talked about how that door slamming affected them and the life of the church.

What seldom gets told is the terrible consequences, most of them unintended, that flow from deep conflict, especially in families of faith. It's always ugly and the results are equally ugly.

Blame is assigned to others, always somebody else. Fingers point, judgments are made and hearts harden. And, I must add, souls shrink.

We've seen it way too many times. People disagree, take sides, become alienated, get committed to their alienation and interpret events to support their side. Real conversation ends, points of view harden, we argue and accuse instead of converse. And, of course, we hurt each other. It's a familiar story. It's the story of the human race. It's the story of the church too.

So it's not surprising God has something to say about conflict and alienation. In fact the Bible explains it. Conflict, according to the Bible, is the consequence of human rebellion against God. God drew a line in the sand and told Adam and Eve not to step over it. On their side of the line were rights and responsibilities. On God's side of the line was territory reserved for God. "Stay on your side of the line," God said.

Of course, they didn't. Adam and Eve declared their independence and stepped over the line. They thought they could run their lives and God's world better than God. They disobeyed and they fell. The history of the world flows out of that fall. Our relationship with God is marred – we're all rebels. Our relationships with each other are poisoned by our own independent sense of entitlement and rights. We struggle to get along. We fight with each other. We refuse to live in God's world according to God's will for the sake of each other.

But God was not willing to leave things alone. God took the initiative even though we're the ones who declared ourselves free from God's rule. God acted to end the alienation.

God didn't have to. It's always easier to be alienated than make things right. It's easier to be angry than make peace. It's easier to hold resentments than give each other the benefit of the doubt. Reconciliation is always difficult and costly. Mainly it costs us our pride.

But, as our Epistle Lesson puts it, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." And here's the remarkable thing. The text goes on to say, "God did not hold our rebellion and sin against us." Instead, God did everything necessary to end our alienation. Jesus Christ sacrificed himself to put us right with God.

Therefore, Paul pleads, "be reconciled to God." And, he adds, "God gave us the ministry of reconciliation."

In fact, God the church of Jesus Christ, to the ministry of reconciliation. Our work is to announce the good news of salvation in Jesus and to create forgiveness among people who get reconciled to God. We are to be reconciled people who reconcile others. In its simplest terms, the Christian church must live in peace in order to offer peace to the world with any integrity.

It's utterly tragic when the church disintegrates into unresolved conflict and alienation. I tell you on behalf of your pastoral staff, the most heartbreaking part of our work is precisely here. People just can't seem to live reconciled lives and spend enormous amounts of time and energy staying alienated from each other – and from us.

We are called to model reconciliation simply because the world needs to see it. That does not mean we will not have conflict. We will. We're human and humans disagree. It doesn't mean we'll always feel good about each other or the church. We won't. Following Jesus isn't about feeling good. It's about serving God, Christ's church and the world.

What reconciliation does mean is that we will live in covenant community. We will disagree but we will learn to do it without the blame game, choosing sides, looking for things to upset us. And we'll learn to lose (and we will lose, perhaps regularly!) with grace. We will give each other permission to be different, think differently – even be wrong. After all, we are members of the Body of Christ.

Of all people on earth, Christians should be the people who know what it means to be committed to the common good. And that always involves sacrifice, curbing our own rights and opinions, graciously submitting to the will of the whole. It's life lived in covenant, in a community and not just any community. We're a community of faith who bear the name of Jesus Christ.

But how? How can we live in such a remarkable fashion? After all, we're humans who live in an adversarial world. How do we keep from dragging all that alienation into our faith community?

Our Gospel Lesson (Matthew 18:15-20) is one answer to those questions. It's a short, simple and revolutionary guide to reconciled relationships in Christ's family.

The lesson is part of a larger conversation in Matthew 18 about life in the church. Interestingly, Jesus starts the conversation by putting a child in the middle of his disciples and telling them that things in his new family are reversed from the ordinary world. In fact, Jesus said, "if you want to be great in the kingdom of God be like this child." Then Jesus says what he means by childlikeness. "Be humble like this child." Children are naturally humble. They know their limits and are openly dependent on others for life and health. It seems Jesus wants his followers to know their limits and to be dependent on God and others for life. The Christian community, therefore, will be a place where pride, arrogance and an independent spirit aren't necessary. It's a place where people will depend on each other and trust each other.

Then, Jesus goes on to say that no one should ever offend one of these children of his. He's speaking now about his humble, childlike followers. "Don't offend each other," Jesus said. "Don't hurt one of these my people.

Rather, welcome each other as you welcome me!" Or, treat each other like Christ treats us and offer that same grace in return.

And, the text goes on, when someone offends you, do something about it. Go put things right. If that doesn't work, take a friend or two with you and make things right. Relationships in the Christian family are crucial. Don't let them stay broken. Finally, if the person won't make things

right, take it to the larger community, the church. It's a matter for public discipline. That's how important reconciliation is.

The community is responsible for the relationships of its members. And we're accountable to the community to stay reconciled with each other.

It's worth noting that in the Reformation, the two great marks of the church were identified as: 1. the faithful teaching and preaching of the gospel and, 2. the proper and regular administration of the sacraments. The Reformed Tradition added a third, now long lost: proper discipline of its members – the community officially holding its members accountable. That includes reconciliation.

Jesus' instructions aren't about installing a legalistic system in which we start judging each other. The point is rather the significance of reconciliation in the community that bears Christ's name.

The lessons for community life are profound and revolutionary. Foremost among them, **YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR RELATIONSHIPS**. It's not about the other guy. Responsible community life forsakes the blame game for personal responsibility, owning our part of every relationship we're in. I'm not responsible for you, I'm responsible for me. And I'm responsible for being reconciled to you to the degree I can be.

That means, according to Jesus, getting small, being humble. Following Jesus teaches us how to renounce blaming others and to accept and own our responsibility in relationships. It means we don't have to win or be right.

Oliver Cromwell, the great Puritan leader, once wrote to an opponent, "I beseech you by the mercies of God, consider that you might be wrong." Well, I think Cromwell was wrong. We should first of all consider the fact that we might be wrong. That's being responsible.

SECOND, RELATIONSHIPS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN MOST EVERYTHING IN THE CHURCH. My rights, my opinions, even my convictions must recede before the larger life and health of the community.

Peter tried to negotiate with Jesus when Jesus said forgiving each other is how we do reconciliation. "How many times do I forgive the offender," Peter asked. "Seven?"

"No, Jesus replied. "Seventy times seven." Or, don't count. Just forgive offensive people!

THIRD. IT TAKES TWO TO MAKE GENUINE RECONCILIATION. And both parties must take responsibility for what went wrong. Both parties need to repent. When the other person won't own the problem or repent, we are responsible only for our part. Forgive and move on. There are no guarantees that our initiative will start reconciliation and no reconciliation is perfect. But it's the right thing to do.

AND WHEN RECONCILIATION OCCURS, IT'S OVER. PERIOD. No going back to set the record straight. No more accusing, blaming, defending ourselves. It's over. Period.

I know something about reconciliation. My brother, Jim, and I raised sibling rivalry to new highs. We invented new ways to despise each other. I left home for boarding school when I was fifteen and didn't see much of Jim from then on.

When we got out of college, Jim went to Hollywood and to rich. I went to seminary and didn't. I made occasional attempts to stay in touch, even get together. Jim wasn't interested. I think I saw Jim maybe three times in thirty years.

Three years ago, I was going to California for a seminar and decided I'd try again. This time Jim said, "It's about time." We got reacquainted, had a great time and have lately become friends. We talk now every couple of weeks. Our project is the health of our parents. Sometimes he calls just because I'm the one person in the world who understands some of his reactions to religious people.

We don't talk about the past. It's over and you know what, it doesn't matter. Jim's as annoying as he always was. He thinks I'm the same offensive big brother I've always been.

It doesn't matter. What does matter is that he's my brother. That's all. He's my brother.

Be reconciled to the family of God. We're family, brothers and sisters and that all that really matters.