

Horses on Parade: XVI  
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I Timothy 1:12-17 and Luke 15:1-10

In the past few years, we've approached each new program year with a theme, around which we've organized our worship and education and service. We've had a year of connecting, a year of feasting, and years of growing, invitation and sowing.

We contemplated, and rejected, several themes for this year. One was a Year of Olympics. In some ways it feels as if we've had that already, and as much as I loved the Olympics, I was glad to get back to normal sleep patterns. Plus, I didn't want to have to get those weird circles all over my shoulders like Michael Phelps.

Another theme we rejected was a Year of Pokémon Go. We worried that some would not know what was going on and others would run into the walls while looking at their phones, a lose-lose any way you look at it.

Or a Year of Election. Actually, we didn't even consider that. You're welcome.

So we looked around and asked a question. What is needed, most, right now, in our church and culture? What do we need and what do we have to offer to a broken and fearful world?

Therefore welcome to a Year of Reconciliation. A year of reconciliation. It seemed timely for several reasons. Reconciliation is a central theme of our faith, how our relationship with God, once broken, is restored. And how that restored relationship with God leads us to seek restoration in our relationships with others, and, in so many ways, with ourselves.

But it doesn't stop there, of course. Some of you will remember the Horses on Parade effort of sixteen years ago, when large, painted, fiberglass horses dotted the landscape of our community, a kind of whimsical civic public arts event. The church had a horse, Horse Chess-nut, on our front lawn. I made the point and continue to make the point that that horse announced to the community that

while what happened within our four walls mattered, it mattered only so much as when we took our faith beyond our walls, a public church sharing a public faith.

Reconciliation cannot simply be between God and us, as central as that is, or among ourselves within the church. The message and promise of reconciliation must spill out of this place into all the places where brokenness is, in our city and communities, in our culture and world.

A Year of Reconciliation. What does that mean? In some ways, these following months will be an attempt to define what reconciliation is and what it looks like. I don't think we need too precise of a definition; rather our quest for a work-in-progress definition will help us in pursuing reconciliation itself.

If we look in the dictionary, we'll find something like this: The restoration of friendly relations. Reuniting. Reunion. Bringing together. Rapprochement. Fence-mending. Resolving. The action of making one view or belief compatible with another. The act of causing two people or groups to become friendly again after an argument or disagreement. The process of finding a way to make two different ideas, facts, etc., exist or be true at the same time. An act of reconciling, as when former enemies agree to an amicable truce. You get the point.

The Latin root of the word has something to do with "making good," *conciliate*, again, making good, again – reconcile.

These definitions seem familiar, and even if we spent all year thinking in those directions, a year of reconciliation would be a good one. And yet we know it goes deeper than that, and that the need for reconciliation is deeper.

"In Christ," Paul wrote in II Corinthians, "God was reconciling the world to himself." We are reconciled to God, and we are given a ministry of reconciliation to live out in the world. The fundamental brokenness, the fundamental relationship that needed restoration, was between God and God's creation, between God and humanity. That has been accomplished in the life and death and new life of Jesus. That means reconciliation is a gift we receive and share, not an accomplishment we achieve.

The theologian Adrian Hastings writes that reconciliation is the “removal of division between God and humanity, a division brought by sin and overcome by Jesus Christ...in whom divinity and humanity are reconciled.” (*The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*) Reconciliation, theologian Noel Leo Erskine writes, is about a “new relationship” between God and humanity. (*Essentials of Christian Theology*).

So perhaps our beginning working definition acknowledges that something was broken, or worn out, or out of balance, and that reconciliation is a restored relationship, a new relationship.

You will hear me many times this year use that language of restoration, of bridging a gap, of healing a difference. And that can’t just be between God and us. That’s the crucial starting point, but it spills over into how we interact with those around us – family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, fellow church members. And how we restore our own broken self-relationships.

Over the course of the coming months we will spend some time on just that – how we accept ourselves when such acceptance feels so difficult. And how we reconcile with those we love when a relationship is strained or estranged. That is difficult as well, and yet it is so important. It is never simply about apologizing and moving on, like a forced parental apology after a sibling fight. Nor is it smoothing over differences for appearance’s sake, pretending the past never happened.

True reconciliation is about truth and honesty and moving *through* brokenness to a new place of restoration and healing, first between God and us, then with ourselves and those around us.

Yet it cannot stop there. It mustn’t stop there. It doesn’t stop there.

One of the very specific entry points we will have with our reconciliation conversation is something called the Confession of 1967. The Confession of 1967, which you will hear me call C67 from time to time, was the Presbyterian Church’s efforts to capture a new theological vision in a very conflicted time in church and culture. If you do the math, you will note that its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary is approaching. I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on C67 because of its theological message but also because of its social and ethical vision.

It laid out four topics – race, poverty, warfare, human sexuality – where the vision of reconciliation was especially needed in the culture. That was controversial then. The Presbyterian Church fought significantly over these words, and in some ways is still fighting over them. Some fought over the content of the list; others fought because the list was included at all. But I believe that its inclusion was true to our Presbyterian roots and more so true to the gospel – that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and not just individuals and not just the church.

Race, poverty, warfare, human sexuality, where reconciliation will mean more than simply bringing people together to shake hands, but working toward truth-telling and justice-seeking so that deep reconciliation is experienced.

So not only will we, over the coming months, look at the theological gift, how our relationship with God is restored and made new. We will look at the ethical demands that such reconciliation makes on us – as individuals and as a church – as we live now some 50 years after this confessional articulation.

We have sent out a copy of the confession and have posted it online. I apologize in advance if we spend too much time on it, if you get sick of it. Even if that happens, I hope we won't tire of the vision, which remains aspirational and incomplete and ever before us, even today, even today.

What does reconciliation look like? The Bible is replete with stories. The lectionary offers us two this morning. One lost sheep out of a hundred. An acceptable business write-off. Yet the shepherd pursues, leaving the ninety-nine at risk. And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. The sheep is found and the shepherd rejoices at this restored relationship.

We are not sheep. Nor are we the one coin of the ten for whom the woman overturns her house to find. Yet when she finds that coin, she rejoices as well.

A year, a season, a journey of reconciliation. At times we will be the lost sheep seeking to be found. At times we will be in the ninety-nine. At times we will be the agent of searching and at times we will be its recipient.

- Can we imagine that space, that reconciliation space, between what is and what will be?
- Can we imagine that reconciliation space between our own sense of brokenness and accepting ourselves fully as beloved children of God?
- Can we imagine that reconciliation space between our current fractured and fractious culture and true community, warts and all, disagreements and all?
- Can we imagine that reconciliation space between us and those from whom we are estranged and true healing?
- Can we imagine that reconciliation space between that lost sheep and what it must feel like for the shepherd to lift you upon his shoulders?
- Can we imagine that reconciliation space between the racial brokenness of this moment and true racial justice?
- Or on this day, some 15 years later, can we imagine that reconciliation space between those horrifying moments and our searching journey even since – as a people, as a global community – those who died, those who survived, those who shared and those who seek, even now, in simple acts and grand gestures, the new heaven and new earth?
- Can we imagine...?

This is the ministry of reconciliation with which we have been entrusted. We are its ambassadors, its angels, its prophets and poets. There is so much work to do. Our gift and our calling. Amen.