

# What Is Reconciliation? Jesus, the Wilderness and Us

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**2 Corinthians 5:16-21 and Matthew 4:1-11**

What is reconciliation? In this, our Year of Reconciliation, it's a good question to ask. What is reconciliation? When I've asked the question recently in Session and Trustee and Deacon meetings, it has generated diverse and rich discussion. When we've contemplated the question in our Thursday discussion, or at our Sunday 9:30 ones, the same has happened.

What is reconciliation?

Is it a financial term? Yes. It took her hours to reconcile the family checkbook, because her spouse's math skills are highly questionable, or, thank goodness the church is presenting a budget that is reconciled.

Is it about accepting, or settling? Yes. In fact, that definition comes up often in our discussions. The group has reconciled to the reality that their candidate won't be chosen, or, Buffalo Bills fans have reconciled to the reality that they will never, ever win a Super Bowl...ever.

Or is reconciliation about healing, restoring, bringing together? Yes. After a six-month separation, the couple has announced they are reconciling, or, labor and management announced they have reconciled their differences in a new contract.

Or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, working toward justice between black and white South Africans. Or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada, working toward justice between First Nation Canadians and French and English settlers.

Is it personal? Yes. He was always trying to reconcile who he was with who he wanted to be. The parents worked hard to reconcile their difficult relationship with their daughter.

Is it cultural, and political? Yes. You can provide your own example here.

In this Year of Reconciliation at Third Church, we will take a particular look in these Lenten weeks at definitions, at examples, at the challenges of reconciliation in the face of our calling both to be reconciled wherever brokenness exists and to be agents of reconciliation in a broken world.

The outline of themes is printed in your bulletins. We chose this theme for this program year nearly a year ago for two reasons. One was that it was so timely, and needed. Well before the election, when racial tensions were particularly high, and other cultural challenges were presenting themselves, we wondered what it would look like to have a sustained conversation about reconciliation.

We've done particular things. We've together watched a documentary on the 1964 Rochester race riots. We've visited the Memorial Art Gallery to look at photographs from the Civil War and rugs created during the war in Afghanistan, with images of weapons woven right in. Our youth have presented the Joseph story as a testimony to family reconciliation. We've read Ta-Nehesi Coates' book *Between the World and Me* and are now reading Debby Irving's *Waking Up White*. Later in Lent our choir will present choral works on these themes.

It is timely, so very timely. We've used the Presbyterian Church's Confession of 1967 a lot, and will do so some more, in part to mark its 50th anniversary – a Presbyterian history geek like me would appreciate that, and ours is a very small universe, so I am seizing the moment – but also because its themes still resonate so. Race. Sexuality and gender. Poverty. Warfare and violence.

So timely. And so needed. Reconciliation with our environment, I would add. I would also add a new urgency to the call for not only religious reconciliation – within our Presbyterian family, within the ecumenical family of churches and now, even this week, interfaith reconciliation, as mosques experience vandalism and Jewish cemeteries experience desecration.

Not only is it extremely timely; it is profoundly timeless. The Confession of 1967 was based on a passage of scripture which has been understood to be central to our theology. We have just heard it. "In Christ, God was in the world, reconciling the world to Godself...and we have been entrusted with the ministry and message of reconciliation..."

You can find many ways to summarize God's mission, God's vision. Here is a central one. As it is articulated, our mission, our vision becomes clear. The world is broken. Our relationships are wounded, the small and intimate ones, and ones that play out on a broader canvass. And God, through Jesus, comes to heal, to repair, to restore. And God, through Jesus, calls us to do the same.

We will spend the next weeks exploring what that looks like, that timely and timeless vision and calling. All aspects will matter, even if we can't cover them thoroughly or I can't consider them adequately, from the ways an estranged couple approaches their brokenness to the ways we think about racial reconciliation to the ways we look at life and death itself.

Lent is a perfect time to do it not only because it provides a framework for worship and study, for personal reflection and communal introspection, but because the themes of Lent, and the narrative framework, are about reconciliation itself.

I saw a bumper sticker yesterday that said "Satan Is Waitin'." I am not sure whether the driver was making a serious theological claim or a tongue in cheek comment, but this morning, anyway, Satan, the devil, is waiting for Jesus. Jesus gave something up for Lent, before there was Lent. But he also took something up, an ongoing challenge from the devil to forsake his humanity, to set aside his reconciling mission and ministry, to grab power and so to leave the ones he came for in the dust.

Three times Jesus says no. Feed yourself. No. Perform a miracle. No. Worship me and consolidate your power. No. Three times Jesus was offered the opportunity to reject the ministry and message of reconciliation, to save his skin by losing his soul. Even at the outset of his public ministry, he knows where this is headed. But still he journeyed into it, eyes wide open. For us. For the world.

And by so doing he confirmed our calling as well. We are ambassadors of reconciliation. The challenge will not be in finding opportunities. We won't have to look very hard – in the mirror, in our own lives, on the front page and on our phone screens. We won't have to look very hard, but we will have to look deeply, to Jesus and to one another, to gather the resources to accept this calling. In our relationships, in our work, in our public and private lives. In the words we say and the words we challenge. In the actions we take and the actions we protest.

That is to say, it would be easy to read about desecrated Jewish cemeteries and shake our heads. Speaking out is one thing, which we are called to do; discerning together what actions we take, as a church and in conjunction with our Jewish friends, must also be part of the call to reconciliation, and to take that example and to apply it to all the places where there is a deep hunger and thirst.

Just as it would be easy to allow a broken relationship, a parent, a child, a partner, a friend, to go unattended. As time goes by the wound deepens. The real challenge of reconciliation is to do the hard work of restoring and healing.

It will not work every time; we do know there may be real irreconcilable differences, globally and personally. But the effort is always worth it, as difficult as it is, and when a relationship is healed, is restored, what a gracious gift that is.

The call to reconcile compels us to look at all of these things, and the promise is that because this is the heart of who God is, and because this is the gospel Jesus came to proclaim, we pursue this not without resources, but with the energy and imagination we need.

As you enter these Lenten days, as you pray and ponder differently, as you give something up or take something up, perhaps as you receive the bread and cup this morning, remember. Remember that in Christ God was in the world reconciling. And remember that you, that we, have been entrusted with the message and ministry of reconciliation. Satan may be waitin', and sin, and brokenness, but Paul reminds us that all this is from God. Our unshakable promise and our urgent hope. Amen.