

The Holy Spirit and Reconciliation

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Acts 2:1-21 (Pentecost)

We have been listening to the soundtrack of *Hamilton* in our house. A theme throughout is the word “shot.” Hamilton declares, ambitiously, in the beginning, “I’m not throwing away my shot,” meaning his opportunities to give shape to this new republic. The word, “shot,” of course, takes on a different meaning later – I hope I didn’t spoil anything!

Reconciliation is an always-present and life-long journey, but this is my one, last shot in our Year of Reconciliation. The theme, it seems, has resonated with you – personally and theologically. You have tolerated my infatuation, bordering on obsession, with the Presbyterian Confession of 1967 very graciously, as we’ve found ways that its now 50-year-old language rings true in 2017. We have watched movies together, gone to the MAG, been inspired by our youth and the Joseph story, read many books and articles. We have discovered how multi-faceted reconciliation is, focusing particularly on the ongoing shame and scandal of racism.

So one, last shot – to reinforce everything, to introduce new thinking, to pull it all together.

- Reconciliation as a personal invitation – how will we – you and me – live as reconciled, reconciling and reconciler?
- Reconciliation as cultural and political hunger – how will healing and restoration happen in our broken and fearful world?
- Reconciliation as a vision for the church, Third Presbyterian Church and our internal and external life, and the broader church facing a moment of extreme evolution.

And reconciliation as theological mandate. Remember all this is launched from a biblical affirmation, the Apostle Paul writing to the church at Corinth about God's vision. "In Christ," Paul wrote, "God was in the world reconciling the world to God." Richard Lischer calls this the "thesis sentence of the New Testament." (*The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*, page 133) God's vision, God's project, is reconciliation.

Then Paul declares something extraordinarily, preposterously, provocatively true: that we – WE! – have been entrusted with the message of reconciliation. God reconciles the world, *through* us. Us! The implications of this – both God's vision and God's use of us as agents of reconciliation – are mighty. And they are clear. If God is about reconciliation, we must be about reconciliation, work that can be gratifying, challenging, non-linear, risky, unpopular. But always worth it, because it's always the gospel.

The great twentieth century theologian Karl Barth wrote of three "phases" of reconciliation:

1. the world, the "cosmos," being reconciled to God;
2. persons being reconciled to persons and groups being reconciled to groups – a social dimension of reconciliation; and
3. human beings being reconciled within themselves, to embrace our humanity.

Barth asserted the unity of divine and human reconciliation, that all the phases are parts of a whole. As we accept reconciliation with God, we can embrace the fullness of our own humanity, and the humanity of others. (See Lischer, pages 135-137, and his consideration of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*)

That vision of reconciliation is at the core of Reformed and Presbyterian thinking. God is sovereign of the whole world, and not just the church-y part. A reconciliation church has very permeable walls and doors wide open to all the world.

Perhaps you remember the "Love is..." cartoons from the 1960's. Here is my version, imperfect and incomplete.

Reconciliation is...

Reconciliation is... accepting ourselves. Only when we look in the mirror and, in the words of Paul Tillich, “accept that we are accepted,” will we be able fully to be the ministers of reconciliation God calls us to be.

*Reconciliation is...*an important challenge in interpersonal relationships. It is easy to speak of reconciliation in the abstract. It gets real in families, or marriages, or friendships. I have had this conversation with some of you this year. For example, how can we consider reconciliation in a marriage that presents irreconcilable differences? I honestly don’t know, yet I do believe that even then our approach to brokenness can have a reconciling affect.

*Reconciliation is...*needed in the church. Matters of human sexuality are settled in the Presbyterian Church – ordination and marriage. Thank God for that. But that doesn’t mean that all agree, or that congregations are not continuing to consider leaving the denomination. What does reconciliation look like in the face, still, of disagreement?

*Reconciliation is...*baptism.

*Reconciliation is...*communion, which we will celebrate today. Think of this table as both platform and portal for reconciliation.

*Reconciliation is...*an ethical mandate, in 1967, in 2017, in 2167. The Confession of 1967 lifted up four crises: Race, military and violence, poverty, sexuality. That list would not change one bit, today, though I might add reconciliation and the environment as a fifth. The bigger point is that the call to reconciliation has a moral and ethical mandate that we cannot ignore, and, stated more positively, is our gift to pursue.

*Reconciliation is...*truth. It is no accident that in South African and in Canada, Truth and Reconciliation commissions were established, in South Africa to address apartheid, a political system supported by the church, and in Canada to address Indian Residential Schools for indigenous students, a political system supported

by the church. Reconciliation is truth. Truth can be difficult, but it will set us free. And we must establish truth before we move to reconciliation.

Reconciliation is...Portland. On May 26, as *Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof tells the story, “A white man riding on (a) train... began screaming anti-Muslim insults at a black 16-year-old girl and her 17-year-old Muslim friend wearing a hijab...(T)hree brave passengers stepped forward to protect the girls...One was a 23-year-old recent Reed College graduate who had a mane of long hair and was working as a consultant. Another was a 53-year-old Army veteran with the trimmest of haircuts and a record of service in Iraq and Afghanistan. The third was a 21-year-old poet and Portland State University student on his way to a job at a pizzeria...

When they intervened, the man harassing the girls pulled a knife and slashed the three men before fleeing. Rick Best, the veteran, died at the scene. Taliesin Namkai-Meche, the recent Reed graduate, was conscious as he waited for an ambulance. A good Samaritan took off her shirt to cover him; she recounted that some of his last words were: “I want everybody on the train to know, I love them.” He died soon after arriving at the hospital. Another passer-by stanching the bleeding of the student poet, Micah Fletcher, and called his mother to tell her to go to the hospital — but played down the injuries to avoid terrifying her. Fletcher underwent two hours of surgery to remove bone fragments from his throat and is recovering.

After coming out of surgery, weak but indomitable, Fletcher wrote a poem that ... read in part:

“I, am alive./I spat in the eye of hate and lived./This is what we must do for one another/We must live for one another.” (Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times*, May 30, 2017)

Reconciliation is Portland.

Reconciliation is...New Orleans. On May 19, as the last of four Confederate monuments were taken down, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu gave a historic speech. You should read it all, or watch it, a speech, offered by a white man of

privilege and power, a speech that has generated tremendous accolade and tremendous backlash. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0jQTHis3f4>) Here is just a portion...

“This is,” the mayor said, “about showing the whole world that we as a city and as a people are able to acknowledge, understand, *reconcile* (emphasis added) and most importantly, choose a better future for ourselves, making straight what has been crooked and making right what was wrong. ...

We have not erased history; we are becoming part of the city's history by righting the wrong image these monuments represent and crafting a better, more complete future for all our children and for future generations. And unlike when these Confederate monuments were first erected as symbols of white supremacy, we now have a chance to create not only new symbols, but to do it together, as one people...”

Then Mayor Landrieu quoted what Nelson Mandela said after the fall of apartheid. "If the pain has often been unbearable and the revelations shocking to all of us, it is because they indeed bring us the beginnings of a common understanding of what happened and a steady restoration of the nation's humanity."

Reconciliation is Portland...

Reconciliation is New Orleans...

Is reconciliation Rochester? Can it be?

Reconciliation is...Pentecost. Pentecost, which we mark today, fifty days after Easter, is a central moment in the Christian story. It is joyous and raucous. It is also baffling and a little scary. What do we do when the Holy Spirit comes and rocks our world, and rocks the church? There are many implications of Pentecost and reconciliation, but one clear one is that while the Holy Spirit calls us to unity – we are told that all could hear and understand the languages being spoken – the Holy Spirit does not call us to uniformity. Reconciliation does not smooth over differences, languages, cultures, experiences. It puts them in a different context,

in order to lead us to a greater and deeper unity. Shane Claiborne writes: “One of the things that happened at Pentecost was a really diverse group of people understood each other, as the Spirit of God fell upon them. It was a divine moment of *reconciliation* (emphasis added) among people from many different tribes and nations and languages — a reconciliation moment I would say the world is desperately in need of today.” (*Huff Post*, August 13, 2011)

I can't stay up and watch late night TV the way I used to. Thank goodness most of the good stuff ends up on the internet the next day. So it was with an appearance by the band U2 on the Jimmy Kimmel show. U2 sang one of my favorite songs – “I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For.” This version included a nice moment – you'll have to look it up – when a part of the audience revealed themselves to be a gospel choir who then sang background to the song. I've watched the clip about a thousand times, and every time it gets me.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yISoAxpKk>) Including these words: “I believe in the Kingdom Come/ Then all the colours will bleed into one/ Bleed into one./But yes, I'm still running.”

Perhaps reconciliation is that: God's vision. All the colors. One. And our journey, toward which we keep running, giving it our best shot, our very best shot, and when we can't, to trust others to give it theirs.

“...(I)n Christ God was reconciling the world to God... entrusting the message of reconciliation to us...”

Let us pray.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful./And kindle in them the fire of your love./Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created./And you will renew the face of the earth. Amen.