“Ripples of Reconciliation”
Ephesians 2:13-17; Romans 5:1-11
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Ephesians 2:13-17

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

Romans 5:1-11

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Sermon

This week I heard a song for the first time. It is “At the Cross” by Terry Butler

I know a place, a wonderful place where accused and condemned find mercy and grace;
where the wrongs we have done and the wrongs done to us
were nailed there with him, there on that cross.
At the cross, you died for our sin.
At the cross (at the cross), you gave us life again.

I was drawn to this song because I believe the accused and the condemned – you and I – find mercy and grace at the cross.

I was drawn to this song because of its mention of both the wrongs we have done and the wrongs done to us being nailed to the cross with Jesus.

And oh how many wrongs we have done and oh how many wrongs have been done to us.

Paul, in Romans 5, describes us as former “enemies of God.” Yet, Paul is very clear to say that God chose the way of reconciliation. Not condemnation. Not ignoring us. Also, God didn’t just say “There, there. It wasn’t that big of deal . . . “this sin thing.” There is both accountability and grace which together lead to reconciliation. All this was through Christ shedding his blood on the cross. Christ died for real sin for which he took the fall, and he offered himself to bring reconciliation between us and God.

“God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

You often hear me speak of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of faith. God took the initiative and took care of our vertical relationship with him through sending his son to die and rise again. But what about the horizontal – the living of our relationships with others? Where is the reconciliation? Where is the peace?

Paul, in Ephesians 2, speaks of “dividing walls of hostility.” Christ has broken down the “dividing wall of hostility” between us and God. But Paul is also saying that Christ “is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall that is the hostility between us.”

I frequently review this history, but I think it’s important. Paul is speaking about the dividing wall that is the hostility between two groups of his day: the Jews and the non-Jews (Gentiles) who were trying to figure out how to be brothers and sisters in Christ in the new thing we now call the Church. This is what so much of the New Testament is about – these horizontal, human-to-human relationships between Christians who come from very different backgrounds and between whom there is deep prejudice. Paul boldly says that Christ’s death on the cross has broken down the wall.

While Paul was talking about two specific groups of people who were concerning him long ago, I believe these words ripple through all time and for all people. Christ has broken down every wall that divides us as human beings.

The Message translation reads: “Christ brought us together through his death on the cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility. Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to the Father. That’s plain enough, isn’t it?”

To which, we all may say: “I don’t see it. How can that be true?”

We look at our own families and say “I don’t see it. How can that be true?”

Parents do not associate with their gay or transgender children. There’s a wall.

Families in our nation are divided over differences of belief regarding our current political situation and its impact on other people. There’s a wall.

Churches are divided within and from one another over big and small differences alike. We exclude people. We are proud. We look down upon others who are not quite as knowledgeable or well-behaved as we are or even those who worship differently from us. There’s a wall.

Racial slurs are used by leaders and children alike. Hate crimes destroy lives and property and peace. There's a wall.

There are walls everywhere – including so many more that I have not mentioned. They seem to be getting more prevalent. How in the world are we to understand Paul's words that Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us? Maybe this did only apply to the first century situation pertaining to Jewish and Gentile Christians. But if we read the New Testament and we look at the world today, we know that the walls of hostility remained then and remain now.

The best explanation I know is that this is part of what we call the "now and not yet" of Christ's redemptive, reconciling, wall tearing down work. It is and it is progressively coming to be. I can best understand the notion of the "now and not yet" by considering marriage. I was married on June 8,1985. I became married when I said "I do, the pastor pronounced us husband and wife," and the pastor signed the marriage license. But Dan and I are still "becoming married" after 40 years of marriage. In other words, after all these years we are still figuring it out. We are still in the process of "becoming one" as we argue about the temperature settings on the thermostats, or money, or how the cars are parked in the driveway, or even how to parent our adult children. We are married and we are still becoming married. The now and the not yet. Paul says that Christ has broken down the walls and is breaking down the walls. And somehow we are to be a part of helping it come to be a reality.

Paul speaks of reconciliation. First, he says that God has reconciled us to himself through Jesus. Second, he says that God in Christ has reconciled us to one another. The two go hand in hand.

Reconciliation among human beings is tricky business.

I spoke with a man on his death bed who told me (and these are his words) "My son has now decided he's a girl. I was mad when he told me. I didn't speak to them for months. Then, I had a change of heart. I love my son. So, I decided to talk to him again and to simply love." Is that reconciliation? It's a step, I think. And even small drops of grace and love can create ripples that grow into reconciliation.

I know parents and children and other extended family members who have made talking politics "off limits" when they are together to try to preserve their relationships. Is that reconciliation? Is that peace? I don't

know. But it does seem to be a decision that is rooted in love for one another even if it's conflict avoidant. Maybe it's a start, or maybe not.

I know others who continue to talk but who are insistent upon respect when they do talk politics. People on both sides of the arguments are trying a gentler approach to influencing one another. Is that reconciliation? It's a start.

How do we address racial slurs, for example? Do we sever relationships? Do we try to understand, education, correct? Can such things be forgiven over time by the ones sinned against? Can attitudes, hearts, minds, and language be transformed in those who speak such slurs? I pray so. Even our most feeble efforts at this type of reconciliation are fragile, but I believe they may be drops of love which can have ripple effects beyond the immediate situations and words spoken.

Reconciliation is not "keeping the peace," it is not denying wrong has been done and the wounds we have inflicted or experienced. Reconciliation is not simply holding our tongues.

Reconciliation requires humility. It requires reckoning with ourselves in a way that is most uncomfortable. Reconciliation requires risk. It requires time. It is often painful. It is a process. It cannot be forced. It doesn't always produce the results we desire.

Nevertheless, we are called to be reconcilers. We are called to live into what Paul says is a reality – the dividing walls of hostility have been broken down and are being broken down by Jesus. If we follow him, we join the work of reconciliation and breaking down walls.

"I know a place, a wonderful place where accused and condemned find mercy and grace;
where the wrongs we have done and the wrongs done to us
were nailed there with him, there on that cross.
At the cross, you died for our sin.
At the cross (at the cross), you gave us life again."

Reconciliation begins at the cross. May we never forget the cross and the impassioned love of our Savior as he died on that cross when we think we can't work toward reconciliation with others. When we think we can't forgive others, let us remember that while we still were sinners . . . enemies of God . . . Christ died for us and gave us life again.