
God's Reconciling Mission—and Ours

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 11 – Year B

“God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.”

This is what Paul tells the Ephesians: they've been made alive and saved through grace, not by their own works or merit, but by grace. All of them.

He's speaking to a relatively new church, of course, which is comprised of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Yes, Jewish and Gentile. This may not strike you as surprising, but it sure would've shocked Paul's contemporaries. Because, in his time, Jews and Gentiles didn't mix. Generations of hostility and persecution and segregation had driven a massive wedge between them. Yet here they are, worshipping together, in peace, as one new humanity.

But how on earth could this be possible?

Well, not by careful negotiation or calculated compromise. Not by conquest or domination of one group over the other. Not by assimilation or inclusion of one group into the other, which implies that one of them retains power over the other.

No, they're reconciled through the humility and love and mercy of Christ. In Jesus, God reconciles us with God *and with one another* by reaching out across all that separates us, and moving toward us. In Jesus, God becomes human just like us, and walks this earth and gets hungry and tired and scared, just like us; and even dies just like us. And in his life and ministry, Jesus persistently moves across dividing lines toward relationship, and toward people, especially those who are broken and alienated. [\[1\]](#)

We're called to follow —to participate in his movement toward reconciliation.

We follow, first, by receiving God's grace ourselves—by accepting God's love and mercy. Which isn't as easy as it sounds. If it were, Paul wouldn't have needed to reassure the Gentile Christians, newcomers to the church and to God's covenant, that they truly belong, as much as anyone else: that they're no longer strangers and aliens, but full citizens and members of the household of God. He wouldn't have needed to tell the Ephesian church that they're already loved and justified, so they can stop trying to earn their own salvation and prove themselves. And they can stop competing and comparing themselves against one another, because God's household is spacious; and because God's love is infinitely abundant; and because they're all there by the grace of God.

We follow Christ toward reconciliation, second, by trusting that God is still at work; and that no person and no relationship is beyond God's power of reconciliation. Ever. This can change how we see even the most stubborn divisions in our world—our racial and political and religious divisions; and it can change how we see broken relationships where they seem to happen and to hurt the most—in our families. No matter how intractable our divisions may seem, our faith forbids us to give up hope.

(This doesn't apply to abuse, of course. In abusive situations, we express hope and faith in God and in ourselves by getting out. This also doesn't mean that we try to force reconciliation or forgiveness. In fact, one of the hard truths about reconciliation is that it takes time, a surrender of control, and a whole lot of grace. So sometimes, the best thing we can do

is simply to pray and to prepare our own hearts and to make room for it.)

Finally, we can follow Christ into the places in our communities most torn by conflict, and offer ourselves as a bridge, and a sign of hope. We can follow Christ *out*, toward relationship, toward people, toward “*those who’ve experienced the deepest division and separation.*”^[ii] Because they may be the ones who have the most to teach about reconciliation. Like the parents of a murdered teenager, who, over time, have reconciled with the parents of the teenager who killed him—and with the teen himself. Or like the adult son, who’s finally able to forgive his dying father for confusing abuse with love. Or like the incarcerated mother, who writes her estranged daughter week after week, for twenty years, with hope and patience—reaching out across the silence, over and over, because her faith in God and in her daughter transcends her fear of being rejected or looking foolish.

It’s a risky journey, of course; Christ shows us that, too. It’s a journey that’s likely to change us, to challenge our sense of identity, and to shake up our worldview—our divisions of people into neat categories of insider and outsider, powerful and helpless, guilty and innocent. It’s a journey that can lead through rejection, discouragement, embarrassment.

Yet, this risky journey is part of God’s mission and Christ’s example, and it’s part of our identity as church: to accept God’s grace; to trust in God’s tireless mission of reconciliation; and to follow Christ toward relationship and toward others, even those we dislike, or fear; and to discover that we are one.

This journey—this venturing out toward others in humility and hope—*this* may be the most powerful witness we have as a church. Because when we make this journey, we’re proclaiming loud and clear our faith in God’s power of reconciliation, in our fellow human beings, and in the peace that Christ offers to all of us.

So send us out, O Lord, “to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.”

[i] John Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Herald Press, 1999), 164.

[ii] *Ibid.*, 165.