Reconciliation with God AND Neighbors
Robert Woody 3/6/16

*Sermon-in-a-Sentence:* God calls us to reconcile not only with God, but also with our brothers and sisters so that we can be One and at peace.

**Children’s Sermon:**

What’s the name of this Church? Church of Reconciliation. What does “Reconciliation” mean? It means when people are divided or separated “to bring them together again” or to connect disconnected people. When we are mad or upset with each other or don’t like each other or don’t know each other, we are spread apart, each of us alone or only with a few friends. But when we reconcile, we come together, we re-connect and become friends, brothers and sisters, and love and support and make each other happy.

Would you rather be part of a family or community where everyone is divided and upset with each other and don’t talk or play together, or a family or community where everyone likes each other and they work to make peace and heal brokenness so they can have fun together?

Where did the word “Reconciliation” that we use in our church name come from? The answer is up there on the wall. Can you read that? It’s based on the reading we heard earlier from Paul’s 2nd letter to the early church in Corinth: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” The words on the hanging are very similar: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and gave to us the ministry of reconciliation.”

Remember last week we talked about the truth that all of us mess up, make mistakes, or as is says in the Bible, sin? And our mistakes, our sins, separate us from both God and from our friends and family. And when we realize we’ve messed up, we’ve sinned and become disconnected or separated from God and from friends and family, what are we supposed to do? Repent. Admit that we have messed up and . . . “turn around,” go back to our God and say “I’m sorry, forgive me.” Or go back to our mom or friend or brother and say, “I’m sorry, please forgive me.”

And when our friend or brother or sister mess up and ask us to forgive them, we offer forgiveness, so we can be reconciled, reconnected.

That’s what the Gospel story was about. A young man demanded his father give him a lot of money and he ran off and spent it all, wasted it; and then realized his mistake, turned around and went back to his father and asked forgiveness and his father forgave him, but his brother didn’t want to forgive him, so they were still separated.

We call ourselves Church of Reconciliation and Reconcilers because that is the most important thing we will ever do in our lives – to recognize our mistakes, our sins, and to turn around and go back to God, who is Our Father and Our Mother, and to go back to our friends and family and say, “I am sorry, I messed up. Please forgive me.” And when they mess up and make mistakes, we also forgive them, so we can be reconciled.

If we are not willing when we mess up, or when others mess up and do things that separate us from God and friends and family, to be reconciled, our lives will be miserable and lonely.
That’s why I want each of you to be a **Reconciler**, so that your life and the lives of your family, friends and neighbors will be full of love and joy.

**Adult Sermon:**

I love the name of this church. I don’t think there is another word that better describes what our life journey is really all about. Our Epistle, our Psalm, our Gospel reading are all about **reconciliation**.

But is the focus of our readings on our reconciliation with God or our reconciliation with one another? Yes. They’re both about being **reconciled** with God and neighbor.

That is not as clear from the Epistle reading, which is a short excerpt from Paul’s second letter to the church he had founded in Corinth. The focus in this reading seems to be on **reconciliation with God**, through Christ.

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. . . . we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

But, if you read the whole letter and also 1st Corinthians, you will discover that there were deep divisions between Paul and this faith community he founded, and there were deep divisions within the faith community. The overall aim or purpose of Paul’s letter was to try to bring about, not only reconciliation with God, but reconciliation between Paul and the Corinthians, and among the Corinthians.

Our Gospel reading, which we all know as the parable of the “Prodigal Son”, also focuses on this very important concept: that we need reconciliation with God and with one another. The first part of the story is about the separation and reconciliation of the father and younger son. What caused the separation? Greed, self-centeredness, lust for money, possessions, pleasure. Welcome to our world. The younger son could not wait to inherit his portion of his father’s estate. To become wealthy and powerful. So he demanded it all now, with no concern for the potential impact on his father or the rest of his family. And then he squandered and wasted it all.

But, when he hit the bottom, he woke up. “He came to himself,” which is the 1st step of repentance and reconciliation. He realizes that his greed and self-centeredness had deeply divided and separated him from his father and his family. And he realizes that his father and family were the true source of life and abundance.

So, he decides to turn around, go back home, and be reconciled to his father. Not so he could regain wealth and possessions, but so he could again be under his father’s love and protection, even though he knew he did not deserve to be his son.

When his father sees him coming from a distance he is overwhelmed with compassion, and runs out to greet him, and hugs and kisses him, (which was symbolic gesture of forgiveness), and immediately the father treats him as a beloved son, giving him clothes, shoes, a ring and a welcoming party.

God, our Father, God, our Mother, so wants to be reconciled with each of us, and is so full of compassion and so willing to welcome us home, if only we are willing to wake up, repent, let go of what has separated us, turn around and come home. Most of us don’t screw up quite as much as the younger brother, but we are all tempted by greed and self-centeredness; and we all get drawn away from God, and need to repent.
This is a most beautiful and engaging story or parable about reconciliation with God, who is represented by this most compassionate and forgiving father. But that’s **not the whole story**. There’s more. There is the older brother. And the relationships between the two brothers and between the older brother and his father.

The Father clearly wants his sons to be reconciled with each other. God wants us to be, not only in relationship with God, reconciled to God, God wants us to be reconciled, in relationship with, each other. We are not called just to be reconciled with God. We are called to be Reconcilers. To help heal the brokenness and woundedness in the world, and to bring us back together, to be the family God created us to be.

God reached out and called the people of Israel, not simply to reconcile and restore their relationship with God, but to make them Reconcilers, so they could be a blessing to all nations and bring them together to be the family of God.

But it’s not easy to be Reconcilers. Why was the older brother so reluctant to forgive and reconcile with his younger, wayward brother? The older brother had every right to be angry with his younger brother, who had treated the family and his father like . . . manure. The younger brother had put lust and greed for money and possessions over love and respect of family. And he could not repay them, he had wasted it all. When the older brother saw his father’s incredible compassion, love and forgiveness towards his wayward younger brother, he saw it as incredibly offensive and unfair.

When the older brother refused to join the party, to celebrate his brother’s return, his father came out and pleaded with him to join them, to be reconciled with his younger brother. But the older son was adamant:

“Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

The father reaches out to his angry older son, with the same compassion and love he had offered to his younger son, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

And the older son’s response? We don’t know. Jesus intentionally leaves us dangling.

Not only is his relationship with his younger brother on the line, but also his relationship with his father is in crisis. Sometimes it is as difficult, or maybe even more difficult, to forgive and seek reconciliation with our brother or neighbor, as it is to repent and ask forgiveness for our own sins. It would be a lot easier if all we had to do is be reconciled with God, and ask God’s forgiveness, so we can enjoy the Abundant Life, now and forever. But Jesus seems to be saying in this parable, that it doesn’t work that way.

Remember the introduction to our Gospel reading? Jesus told this parable to the Pharisees and scribes, the religious elite, who “were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” (Luke 15:1-3) If we are not willing to seek forgive and seek reconciliation with our brother, our sister, our neighbor, then our relationship with God is at risk. Yes, it usually begins with reconciliation with God, but that is **not** the end of the story.
What is the great commandment, the summary and bottom line of all Scripture, according to Jesus? Love God with all your heart, mind and soul, AND love your neighbor as yourself. And if we don’t love our neighbor, if we don’t love our brothers and sisters, all of them, are we, like the older brother, choosing to miss out on the great Kingdom banquet?

Too often, we narrow our spiritual focus to our relationship with God, . . . . so we can get to heaven. But what about our neighbors? Can we truly be reconciled with God, and ignore our relationship with everyone else? It is so easy to judge our needy neighbors and justify our refusal to truly reach out to them – whether they are people of color, immigrants, Muslims, homeless people, unemployed, mentally ill. Sometimes we consciously or unconsciously judge them for seeing and experiencing the world differently, through a different “lens” than we grew up with or have created.

I never realized how racist I was until I began to see and realize that I had been raised and lived my entire life through the lens of white privilege. I have been a part of and mostly unconsciously, I have supported what I now know as “institutional” racism. I have lived much of my life, likes the Pharisees and scribes Jesus was addressing, as a divider, rather than a Reconciler.

As you know all too well, I love the stories of reconciliation from the history of this faith community – welcoming and reconciling with radical artist, welcoming and reconciling with divorcees, welcoming and reconciling with alcoholics and other 12 Steppers, welcoming and reconciling with our LGBT brothers and sisters, and now welcoming and striving to reconcile and connect with our diverse neighbors. And in each chapter, recognizing that we, like the Pharisees and scribes, and like the older brother, have been looking at the world through a narrow and distorted lens, that needs to be replaced, that God wants to replace, with a lens of compassion, love and acceptance.

This has never been easy. Reconciliation is always difficult and messy and risky.

We all know that we are in a very difficult and messy and scary time in our world, and even in our own nation. There is so much hate and division being spewed out all around us. And, we are still called to be Reconcilers. God and Jesus will never stop putting challenges before us. And God and Jesus will never stop calling me and you and us to be Reconcilers.

We are lucky, I guess, because we have it branded on our forehead. That makes it really hard for us to ignore God’s call.