

WHEN IT'S TIME TO RECONCILE

Romans 12:9-21

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Artist Billy Davis recorded a song a few years ago that goes something like this:

*"I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect
harmony,
I'd like to hold it in my arms and keep it company.
I'd like to see the world for once all standing hand-in-hand,
And hear them echo through the hills for peace throughout the land."*

Well, wouldn't we all? Is peace and harmony a pipe dream or a purposeful pursuit? Is reconciliation a realistic expectation or a useless fascination? What is this ministry of reconciliation to which God has called us in Christ Jesus, our Lord? I'd like to talk about that for a few moments today.

In the twelfth chapter of Romans, St. Paul peppers would-be Christians with practical advice like: *Love one another, Honor one another, Bless one another, Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those weep.* It is one of my favorite passages in the New Testament. Then he says this, "*Live in harmony with one another.*" How can we do that? May I suggest some ways?

First, we can balance the books of justice. Reconciliation begins with the principle of justice. When I was a student pastor in Bardstown, Kentucky, Ms. Stora Barlow, who was the treasurer of the place, would invite us down to her house once a quarter. She would serve us a delicious home-cooked meal. When supper was over she would clear the table and pull out the church financial records so we could balance the books. It is the only church I have served that trusted me with the money. The purpose of the evening was to make sure the books balanced. What we spent and what we received was reconciled with the bank statement. I enjoyed the food much more than I enjoyed the accounting. Nevertheless, it was part of the responsibilities of that day.

To reconcile is to make consistent. To reconcile is to harmonize. To reconcile is to obtain an agreement between two records by accounting for outstanding items. If people hope to be reconciled to one another, then rightness must reign. The facts have to be put on the table and all parties have to pursue full disclosure. Justice must become the order of the day.

Amos said in 5:24: "*Let justice roll down like a river and righteousness as a never-failing stream.*" You see, this troubler from Tekoa, this country boy, had come to the city and discovered a real problem in the marketplace. The scales did not always weigh the same when weighing grain. Prices seemed to change depending on the customer. Standard measures didn't seem to be so standard.

There was something about it that troubled this prophet.

So he took his message to the streets and said, “Right ought to be right and wrong ought to be wrong. Standards ought to be the same standards for everybody.” In fact, in one of the texts of Amos he says, *“Hear this you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, The Lord will not forget what you have done. The land will tremble for this and all who live in it will mourn.”* Justice is our starting place.

Do metro police officers intentionally pull over more minority drivers than white drivers? Somebody needs to answer that question. Is it fair for predatory lenders to make loans to poor people who have no chance of paying that loan back? Somebody, including Congress, needs to ask that question. Should a few insiders be able to cash in their assets in a company headed for bankruptcy while the rank and file lose their hope for retirement? Somebody ought to examine that issue.

As a minister of the gospel, I enjoy my American freedom of speech, but does that mean I am free to spread lies and incite hatred? God may hold Rev. Davis accountable for that in this city!

Is it right for many of us, myself included, to own more than one house when much of the world does not have a place to lay its head? I’m sure some of you will give me an answer about that.

So we pray for a just and equal sharing of things the earth affords. Occasionally we come to a church and we confess our sins. We own the fact that we fail to hear the cry of the needy. But I have a suspicion that what most needy people would like to hear is a little less talk and a lot more action. Do we really mean “liberty and justice for all?” Reconciliation begins with justice. We who call ourselves Christian, individually and collectively, must commit ourselves unflinchingly, even when it hurts, in that direction. Reconciliation.

In the second place, to reconcile is to break down the walls of hostility. “Remember the Titans” is a popular movie. It is a true story of a Virginia high school football team that faced their fears of integration. That made them champions in the community as well as on the football field. The year was 1971. Herman Boone, a black man, had just replaced Bill Yoast, a white man, as football coach at T.C. Williams High School. Coach Boone had the awesome responsibility of taking two groups of young people and merging them together into a team while a community was angry and ready to riot. Thanks to an all-American high school kid by the name of Gary, and a star defensive player by the name of Julius, the impossible happens in the movie. The walls of hatred and hostility begin to break and come down.

These two great football players lead their team toward a state championship. It is a high moment in their team life. Then Gary suffers an automobile accident and winds up in a hospital. When Julius comes to see him, Gary’s mother says,

“Julius, you are the only one he wants to see. Go in and talk to him.” Julius, this black kid, walks through the door and the nurse says, “Only kin are allowed in here.” Gary responds, “He’s my brother, can’t you see the resemblance?” Then he says to Julius, “I was scared of you Julius. I could only see what I was afraid of. Now I know I was just hating my brother.” And Julius says in response to him, “I tell you what though, when all of this stuff is over, we’re going to move out to the same neighborhood, you and I, and when we get old and fat together, ain’t going to be any more of this black and white stuff. We’re going to get beyond that.”

One of my favorite poems is Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall.” Maybe some of you know it. It is the story about two New England farmers who go out every spring to mend the rock fences that have broken with the freeze and thaw of the winter, a rock fence like the one on Old Smyrna Road today. They have been doing it for years, going out and mending those fences in the spring. They have done it over an old supposition that good fences make good neighbors. Maybe it’s the mischief of spring in me, muses one, but I’m beginning to wonder, “why good fences make good neighbors?” After all, my apple trees are not going to come over and eat the cones under his pine trees. Do we really need these fences any more? And then Frost has that farmer say this:

*Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That wants it down.*

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall that wants it down. I do not know what the walls may be in your life. But, I know that our fears need to be faced. I ask you today what hurts need to be forgiven? I ask you what prejudices need to be surrendered? I ask you today what changes need to be made down in the depths of your life so that the walls that separate us one from another can be removed? For *something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.*

*In Christ there is no east or west, in Him no north nor south,
But one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.*

Reconciliation happens when we break the walls of hostility between us.

Just one more thing. We have got to balance the books of justice. We have to break the walls of hostility, but there is one more thing. We need to build a bridge of love. In John 13:35 Jesus said, *By this shall all people know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.* Love is an action verb. Reconciliation is love in action.

Bill was a college student. He had wild hair, torn clothing, and imperfect personal hygiene. He was a brilliant, but off-beat kid who found the Lord in a

college dorm one night. Bill had no church background. He knew nothing about the customs of Christianity. He did not know how to be proper in church. So, when he saw a church at the edge of the campus the very next Sunday morning, he just walked in. The service had already started in this conservative, well-dressed congregation. It was packed like this service is today. So, he just started walking right down the center aisle to the front. When he could not find a place to sit, he just sat down on the floor. He felt comfortable there.

There was, in that church, an 80-year old usher with gray hair and a dignified look. When he started walking down the aisle toward Billy, the preacher and every person in the congregation cringed at what might be about to happen. But the old man came to the front of the church and when he got to Billy, he bent his creaky knees until he could sit down Indian-style beside him. He reached over and said, "We'll enjoy this together." Together they sat on the floor in the front of the church until the service ended. That day a self-righteous church understood what it means to love one another. *By this shall all people know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

Loving when they are lovely and loving some folk that are not very lovely. In fact, Jesus gets extravagant about it all, doesn't He? It is really extravagant. He dares to say, and Paul picks it up and repeats it here in this passage of scripture, *love your enemies, bless those who persecute you.* That is tough stuff. *Do not take revenge. Do not be overcome with evil but overcome evil with good.*

When Carlos Eira, a Yale professor, visits his mother he often finds himself the resident theologian in a little Cuban immigrant community of her friends. One day the ladies asked Carlos "Is it possible for Fidel Castro to convert on his death bed and end up in heaven?" Carlos responded, "Well, of course it's possible. That's the Christian faith. It's grace all the way home. Any of us have a chance to make it into the kingdom of God." The little lady looked up at Carlos and said, "Then I'm not sure I want to go to heaven if Castro is there."

People often ask me, "Will I meet my loved ones in heaven?" You know that is not the question that bothers me. The question that bothers me is, "Will I be ready to live for eternity with some of the people I have met on earth?" If I wind up on the same street or in the same house, sharing the same mansion with some folk on this earth, will not that make a hell of heaven? Ah, that is the question.

Suddenly, reconciliation is more than a nice little idea that we have tossed around here and there. It is nitty-gritty essential work that ought to get us ready for the kingdom of God. We have got to get in the business of reconciliation. How are we going to make it in heaven if we have not figured it out here on earth?

Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we celebrate, said, "If somebody doesn't have sense enough to turn on the powerful lights of love in this world, the whole of civilization will be plunged into the abyss of destruction."

*Lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty.
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.*

Let us learn, by God's grace, how to live together lest we perish apart as fools!
That is life's biggest challenge. Amen.

