

**“be reconciled”**  
**A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston**  
**Thomaston, Maine**  
**Sunday, February 16, 2020**  
**Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet**  
**Scripture: Matthew 5:21-37 & Deuteronomy 30:15-20**

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”  
Matthew 5:21-37

Will you pray with me. Holy One, forgiver of our sins, reconciler of our hearts, remind us this day that we are not perfect, only human. Show us how to choose life in your Spirit over death from our own doing. Guide us when we fall short of your instructions. We pray that you will always give us another chance even when we really blow it sometimes. Amen.

I don’t know about you, but if I were to take our reading from Matthew for today literally, and personally, I would be a dead duck in the water. The only sin Jesus mentions in this passage that I haven’t committed is the one about murder. I can honestly say I’ve never killed anyone. But I have to confess I’ve been involved, to a greater or lesser degree, in all the others – getting angry and not reconciling.... getting tied up in those pesky and messy marriage matters.... getting angry and muttering those pesky four-letter words we wouldn’t want our mothers to hear.

No two ways about it, I have not lived up to the commandments, the instructions laid down by Jesus and by his forefathers of the Old Testament about how we are to live. How about you? Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask you to raise your hands. I probably know the answer. For we are not perfect, none of us. We make mistakes. We don’t treat

people nice sometimes. We use others for our own purposes and passions. We don't always forgive and forget. Too often we hold on to grudges like a dog with a bone and remember forever when someone has done us wrong.

Asking for forgiveness.... receiving the forgiveness of others.... and moving on.... is probably one of the greatest transactions of mercy we can demonstrate to God, yet too often that transaction doesn't take place. Conflicts between nations, conflicts between neighbors, conflicts between members of one family, conflicts in church congregations are constructed and unfortunately cemented too often because we haven't learned very much about forgiveness and reconciliation.

In our passage from Matthew for today, Jesus commands, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first **be reconciled** to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." (Matt 5:24)

Now if each of you took that commandment to heart literally, we might not have much at all in these collection plates on Sunday! So while you're *working on* this forgiveness/reconciliation thing, don't forget to offer your gifts to God along the way. The church's oil bill needs to be paid each month whether you've settled your disagreements with others or not! Maybe Jesus didn't have to worry about the temple's maintenance tasks when he gave these commands!

What does it mean to be reconciled? (get responses) My computer thesaurus says to reconcile means:

"to bring about a friendly relationship between disputing people or groups, or to solve a dispute or end a quarrel, or to make somebody accept that something undesirable cannot be changed, or to make two or more apparently conflicting things consistent or compatible, or to return to a friendly relationship after a dispute or estrangement.

Or to put it more simply – to reconcile means to settle, to put to rights, to bring together, to square, to reunite, to resolve, merge or patch up." In the Roman Catholic tradition reconciliation is the sacrament whereby an individual's sins are absolved through confession and penance.

In our tradition reconciliation isn't a holy sacrament, but I've certainly had challenging pastoral conversations with many people over the last twenty years about trying to reach reconciliation with another person. These conversations have been about the trials and traumas of not being able to come to some degree of reconciliation between family members, church members, business associates, and others.

From world affairs to faith affairs to family affairs, reconciliation is a big deal and it's been that way for a long, long time. What are we to do about this? How are we ever going to learn to get along together, to stop warring with each other, to overcome our prejudices and powers of denial and disagreement if we can't come to agreement even about spiritual things – like whether any image or understanding of Jesus can be truly accurate and representative of what he came to offer in his ministry.

We have dozens of different Christian denominations whose followers do not agree, and sometimes adamantly disagree, about who Jesus was and how we are to live out his teachings. Evidence the divisive dialogues going on right now in the United

Methodist Church over whether gay people have a place in the denomination or not. I'm not sure complete reconciliation is going to ever entirely take place over this matter.

How are we ever going to learn to get along when members of political parties can't seem to look beyond the end of winning their next campaigns to see what's on the horizon for all of us, no matter our political persuasions?

How are we ever going to learn to get along when we demonize those who are not like us – Christian Americans afraid of all Muslims, many Muslims and Jews believing Christian Americans are evil?

I have one answer. It comes from the words of Deuteronomy that we heard this morning. As the scene opens we hear God's words to Moses that he delivers to the Israelites, "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess." (Deut 30:15-18)

*Obedience and blessing.* If we are obedient, we will be blessed. But being obedient doesn't mean to be an unthinking servant or to feel forced to do something we don't want to do.

Being obedient means to *listen*, to receive a call and to accept it.

Being obedient means to *do something* we might not want to do, but we do it anyway because God's commandments don't come cheap.

They come with *instructions as well as assurances.*

They come with *responsibilities as well as freedoms.*

They come with *head work as well as heart work.*

And if we are obedient, blessings will overflow – not promises of bad things never happening, but *in spite of* bad things happening, not a *never ending flow* of good fortune, but a *well of reserve* from which to drink whenever things go awry.

These things are easy enough for me to say – I've never been homeless, I've never been beaten or raped, I've never been without employment, I've never lost a home because I couldn't make the mortgage payments, I've never had to pick up a gun and go to war, I've never been seriously at odds with family members and unable to reconcile with them.

What do I know? Not much, except to trust that the Word of God is not an empty promise. It is not a cheap trick, not a bribe, not something written in an antiquated useless book written too long ago to be of any use now. The Word of God is something we can depend on even when we have no idea what the future will bring, even when some of God's Words themselves seem at odds with one another.

"According to an old preacher's story that probably is not true, years ago when spies were captured by the Persian Army and brought in for execution, one particular general would give the spy the unusual choice of the firing squad or whatever was behind a big, black door. The spies, according to the legend, always decided on the firing squad. They did not know that the door led to nothing terrifying. It led outside. When the general was asked why he gave prisoners a choice that would have led to freedom, he answered,

‘Almost everyone chooses death over the unknown. People are actually more afraid to live than to die. Anyone with the courage to choose what they don’t already know deserves life.’<sup>1</sup>

We can never know what the future may bring.

We may never truly be reconciled to one another through all the disagreements we have over a lifetime – we may be just too stubborn and too human for that.

But we are given the opportunity to keep trying. We are called to obedience to God’s commandments with the promise of blessings for our lives if we listen. God offers us a choice each day when we open our eyes and get out of bed. Matthew, the Gospel writer, says “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’” (Matthew 5:37) The Old Testament sage proclaims that God says, “I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19)

What shall it be this day? Let us strive to be reconciled with God and with one another. Let the people say, “Amen.”

---

<sup>1</sup>From a commentary about Deuteronomy 30:11-20 by Brett Younger, MacAfee School of Theology, Atlanta, GA.