

Peace With God

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Colossians 1:21-23

Sermon Series:
Journey of Transfor-
mation

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I lived for recess when I was young. I tolerated math and English, but I absolutely lived for recess. My friends and I played everything at recess—basketball, baseball, football, kickball. Anything that could be caught, thrown or rolled, I played it! I even kept at my desk a running tally of my batting average and scoring totals from recess. I was honing my math skills.

When I was in the sixth grade, my elementary school was so crowded that all the sixth grade classes were relocated to a nearby church on the same street. No one gave a thought in those days to whether it was appropriate for a school to meet in a church. The church happened to be First Presbyterian, the church my family attended.

One sunny afternoon, our teacher said the magic words—it's time for recess—and I was out of my seat in a flash. I bolted out the door with such enthusiasm that I separated the door from its hinge. Worse yet, my recess privileges were promptly suspended. That night I handed my parents a note from the teacher informing them of the broken door. To add insult to injury, my dad insisted that we would return the next day to fix the door after school. Now my sin would be on display for everyone to see. We fixed the door as

planned. Well, actually Dad fixed the door and I held the tools.

This memory came flooding back to me as I was thinking about our Scripture lesson this week. The passage we have been exploring last Sunday and today acts as a type of hinge in Paul's letter to the Colossians. It separates the introduction of Paul's letter from everything that follows. All of Paul's ethical imperatives follow from this single passage.

Colossians 1:15-23 is often called a hymn because of its rhythmic prose, set forth in three carefully balanced strophes or sections. We don't know if this hymn was already in use by the early church or was first composed by Paul. The first section celebrates Christ as Creator (1:15-17). Jesus Christ did not come into existence at Christmas. He exists as Lord over creation from the very beginning. "In him all things were created; all things have been created through him and for him" (1:16).

The second section, in verses 18-20, celebrates Christ as Redeemer. Paul writes in verse 20, "In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things...."

Let me take you back to God's Big Story. We have been using a trilogy of words to tell God's Big Story. The first word is creation.

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you....***

We have been created to live in relationship with God and people. The second word is fall. We fall out of relationship with God through something called sin. Sin, as we're told in verse 21, causes estrangement: "And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds." These words sound harsh, but they're true. Evil deeds are not only things other people do. We are capable of monstrous evil.

The third and final word in God's Big Story is redemption. God redeems or reconciles (these words are synonymous with each other) "by making peace through the blood of the cross" (1:20). Jesus Christ serves as God's agent of reconciliation.

People tell me, especially as they face their own mortality, "I've made my peace with God." When people talk this way, something in me wants to interrupt them and shout to the highest heaven, "You can't make peace with God, not when God has already made peace with you through the blood of the cross." We can't make peace with God. God makes peace with us.

I read a true story about a husband and wife who became estranged from each other. They separated and moved away to different parts of the country to begin new lives for themselves. The husband returned to the city, where they once lived, on business and visited the cemetery where their son was buried. He was standing by the grave when he

heard a step behind him. Turning around, he saw his estranged wife, who also happened to be in town and was visiting their son's grave. Their first instinct was to turn away. But they shared a common interest in that grave. Instead of turning away, they joined hands over the grave of their son and were reconciled. They were reconciled by death.

God reconciles people through the death of his son. Reconciliation, then, is a one-sided process. God does virtually everything. Reconciliation is entirely God's doing. Reconcile appears in aorist tense in this passage and designates completed action. God has exchanged hostility for friendship. Our estrangement from God is taken away. God has made it possible for us to be reconciled.

So then, what do we contribute to this reconciliation? Absolutely nothing! Psalm 53 comes to mind, "There is no one who does good, no, not one." None of us merits God's favor. The Psalmist is emphatic on this point. No one is righteous. No one includes everyone.

Most of us don't like the notion that there is nothing we can contribute to our redemption. Okay, there is something we can contribute. According to Martin Luther, we contribute sin and resistance!

In the third section or strophe, verses 21-23, Paul moves from speaking about Christ's creation and redemption at the cosmic realm to speaking about it in the personal realm. The pronoun "you," which references these Colossian believers,

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is placed in emphatic position. Once you were estranged, but now you have been reconciled.

What is there left for us to do? All we have to do is respond. If someone offers you a gift, common courtesy requires you to open the gift and thank the giver. You don't honor someone by taking the gift and leaving it on the shelf unopened. A gift is not really a gift until it is opened.

Have you opened God's gift of reconciliation? God's gift of reconciliation will never be forced on you against your will. God does not engage in coercive tactics. God has created us with a will so we can make informed choices.

Some of you may be saying, I'll make this decision later when I am older or settle down or get married or finish college or retire or some such excuse. There will come a time when later becomes an impossibility.

We have been created for relationship in God's Big Story. This reconciliation is with God and each other. It is both horizontal and vertical.

The scope of this reconciliation is perfectly illustrated in the cross. A cross is made up of two intersecting beams—one horizontal and the other vertical. The vertical beam stretches tall between heaven and earth to symbolize God's reconciliation with us. The horizontal beam extends in either direction, depicting our reconciliation to each other.

The longer I am in ministry, the more I am aware of the massive

fractures among family members. In this day and age, when there is so much instant communication by cell phone, text messaging and email, isn't it ironic that people remain so estranged from one another. People in the same blood line refuse to speak to one another. Family members seem perfectly willing to carry these grudges with them to their graves.

Two renowned British novelists, William Thackeray and Charles Dickens, once had a vicious quarrel. Just before Christmas in 1863, they ran across each other in London but refused to speak to one another. Bothered in his conscience, Thackeray turned back and seized the hand of his friend, saying that he couldn't bear the coldness between them. Dickens was touched, and their old anger and jealousy gave way to reconciliation. Shortly thereafter, Thackeray suddenly died. Reflecting on this incident, a man who was a friend of both Thackeray and Dickens wrote in his memoirs, "The next time I saw Dickens he was standing at the grave of his rival. He must have rejoiced, I thought, that he had shaken hands so warmly a few days before."

You may be waiting for the other person to make the first move. After all, he's the one who is really at fault. She's the one who ought to be apologizing.

My counsel is to suck it up and make the first move. Go to the person with whom you are estranged, and tell him or her that you would like to be reconciled. Tell the person how much you regret the conflict and offer your sincere apology.

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You don’t need to apologize for everything—only the things for which you bear responsibility. I find the words “I’m sorry” to be incredibly disarming. Sometimes these two little words are all it takes to neutralize the conflict and initiate a process toward reconciliation.

If a person refuses your apology, then you have done your part. Paul counsels his readers in his letter to the Romans, “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (12:18). Peace may not be possible because the other party refuses to participate. We are never responsible for the part that depends upon someone else.

I find it helpful to focus, not on the wrongs committed by someone else, but on the enormity of the debt I owe to God. If God has forgiven me of such a colossal debt, I am in a much better frame of mind to forgive people of their comparatively minor infractions.

I am inviting you, today, to receive God’s gift of reconciliation. If you are already a Christ follower, then devote yourself to a journey of transformation this year. In 30 years of ministry at Vienna Presbyterian, I have seen plenty of people begin the journey but fall by the wayside. That’s why Paul concludes with a plea for perseverance in verse 23: “...provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith.”

I have two suggestions if you want to get serious about this journey of transformation in 2010.

Join a small group studying the book of Colossians and, before your life becomes crazy hectic, sign up for our March Sacred Rhythms retreat.

As part of Christ’s reconciling work in your life, I invite you to take inventory of your relationships with family and friends. Who comes to mind with whom you need to be reconciled? Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:16-17). As I say every Sunday in the benediction, “Love the Lord and love the people; serve the Lord and serve the people.” Amen.

