

The Work of Reconciliation
Matthew 5:21-26
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
June 23, 2024
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

You might remember that last month on Youth Sunday the scripture reading talked about the most important commandment, to which Jesus, very much in line with the Hebrew scriptures, answered that there were two - love God and love neighbor. During the telling of that scripture, two of our youth visually illustrated this with a poster of two separate parts joined together. One says "love God" and the second "love each other."

Time and time again scripture reminds us that both matter. In fact, in scripture they are so deeply rooted together that you cannot separate one from the other.

Yet too often we, who are people of faith, like to isolate our relationship with God, sometimes so we don't have to deal with the challenges of loving our neighbors. And today's scripture pushes back against that idea as it says that going to make things right with our neighbors allows us to be more fully, honestly, truly in relationship with God.

Friends, our faith is not a "me & Jesus" enterprise. It is not just about what we get in return for a statement of belief, a good attendance record in worship, or a cross around our necks. Rather our faith is that which calls us into right relationship, not only with God, but with other people.

So, what would it mean for us to make things right with our neighbors? What would it mean for us to be reconciled to those who have something against us?

Often when we hear these types of questions, we only think of those closest to us - either emotionally or physically - those individuals with whom we have relationships. So, we might think of strained relationships with family members, a fight with a friend, a messy divorce, a co-worker or neighbor who feels like an enemy. And these are important relationships to consider, important relationships within which to wonder about reconciliation, to work toward making things right.

And, as important as they are, they aren't the only ones.

In fact, within the context of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) we have, since the late 1960's, used the word reconciliation in connection with the realities of racism. We have, since then, had a Reconciliation Ministry which recognized that our society is structured such that one group benefits while others are systemically marginalized. Over the years we have made efforts to address the underlying causes of racism and to create a more just church and world ([History of Reconciliation Ministry - Reconciliation Ministry](#)).

"In 1996, the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) approved the formation of a church-wide process to discern the nature of racism in North America and to develop ways of helping congregations address racism. Out of this process, an Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation initiative was put before the church in 1998...."

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“The Initiative called the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to practice faithfulness with regard to the elimination of racism, which exists in all manifestations of the church, to discern the presence and nature of racism as sin, to develop strategies to eradicate it, and to work toward racial reconciliation” ([The Initiative - Reconciliation Ministry](#)).

Then in 2001 the General Assembly adopted the 2020 Vision which named four interconnected mission priorities. Becoming a Pro-Reconciliation/Anti-Racist Church was one of those. And as such, “The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) remains vigilant and faithful in pursuing God’s call to reconciliation, ‘breaking down the dividing walls’ that separate us from one another and God and building up God’s realm on earth!” ([History of Reconciliation Ministry - Reconciliation Ministry](#))

And yet all these years later... 160 years after the abolishment of slavery, 60 years after the Civil Rights Movement, nearly 25 years after our denomination’s vision of becoming an anti-racist church...the work still continues. And some days it may feel like we are further from the goal than ever before.

So, how do we accomplish this work of reconciliation, this work that the gospels tell us is not only important but urgent enough that it should become a priority? Did you hear that in the scripture? It said that if you remember something that someone else has against you, leave - even in the middle of worship - and go make it right.

But how do we do that?

The reality is that even in seemingly small conflicts with people we love deeply, we sometimes struggle. And then, if we broaden the lens to include things like our nation’s original sin of slavery and the racism that continues today, it can be overwhelming.

So, what is reconciliation anyway?

A quick internet search produced the definition, “the restoration of friendly relations.” And yet, that seems unsatisfactory to me. Not only are we good at faking friendly relations, which means we can let ourselves off the hook if that’s how we define it, but reconciliation is so much more than that.

Look at Merriam-Webster’ thesaurus and you’ll read, “to bring to a state free of conflicts, inconsistencies, or differences” ([RECONCILE Synonyms: 50 Similar and Opposite Words | Merriam-Webster Thesaurus](#)). Maybe that’s a little closer. After all, if we are rebalancing the state of things to remove inconsistencies and differences then we cannot get there with a false facade of friendly relations.

And yet still, reconciliation often seems a distant dream. Which maybe stands witness to the reality that it is both important and difficult work.

In the podcast, “You Didn’t See Nothin,” Yohance Lacour revisits the 1997 attack on Lenard Clark, a 13-year-old black boy, who was beaten into a coma after riding his bike into a predominantly white neighborhood in Chicago. Lacour reflects not only on the events of that beating, but on the reality that “almost overnight, the news stories turned to racial reconciliation and forgiveness” (Yohance Lacour, *You Didn’t See Nothin*).

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In a recent interview on Fresh Air, Tonya Mosley asked Lacour this: “You’ve thought for a long time what reconciliation really looks like, what it could look like. What have you come to?”

Lacour answers, “So, unfortunately, I don’t think it’s possible because I don’t think that white folks at large are going to do what they would have to do for reconciliation to be real. Reconciliation is a weird word to even use when we’re talking about what’s going on between Black folks and white folks in America because to reconcile means, like, you’re looking past some differences...it kind of suggests that you’ve got two parties, both of whom have some sort of responsibility in the divide, in the split, right? And that’s not the case here.

Lacour goes on saying, “You beat me to a pulp, and you want me to forgive you, but you never acknowledge what you’ve done. You never try to repair any of what you’ve done. You kind of continue doing it in new ways. You pay other people to do it for you in my face and let them off for doing it, and I’m supposed to forgive you and embrace you? Where’s the reconciliation there, especially if the assault is ongoing? And so, yeah, I feel like reconciliation ain’t a real thing, ain’t going to be a real thing in America” (*Fresh Air*, May 30, 2024).

Those are hard words for us to hear. And, likely, words we need to hear...not so we give up the work, but so we understand the importance and seriousness of the work.

This has been a struggle throughout the life of our movement. I remember a couple years ago hearing a presentation about our founders, Campbell and Stone, and their perspectives on slavery. The bottom line was that while they both opposed it, when push came to shove, they chose unity over a strong position of opposition.

Maybe their commitment to unity was that deep. Or maybe choosing unity let them off the hook from the hard work of reconciliation, work for which those who look like me and benefit from white supremacy have primary responsibility for.

This is work to which we continue to be called. So, we step forward, embracing the charge to be an anti-racist church and an anti-racist people. We make this commitment reminded that being anti-racist is an active state, a state where we are “pressing for policies that create racial equity” ([Ibram X. Kendi on the difference between "antiracist" and "not racist" - CBS News](#)).

So, how do we do that? Perhaps we follow these principles that the Church of England has identified for living well together:

- acknowledge PREJUDICE
- speak into SILENCE
- address IGNORANCE
- cast out FEAR
- admit HYPOCRISY
- pay attention to POWER
- commit to ACTION

([Liturgical Resources for Racial Justice Sunday | The Church of England](#)).

This is work that requires more than words. It asks for an investment of our hearts and lives. May it be the work we choose.

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