

Reconciliation (Sept. 10 Sermon)

by Veronica Garcia-Robles

I have never liked being confrontational. I don't like arguments, disagreements, discord or misunderstandings. And I certainly do not like the hurt feelings that stems from all of these things. I imagine most of us prefer living in a peaceful community, whether it be here in our church, within our homes, at our work, or within our city, country and world. But there is much discord in many of these places and today, and in the Gospel of Matthew, we hear Jesus as he is speaking to his disciples about a very practical matter...the matter of dealing with sin and disciplining members of the church when discord inevitably finds them. Jesus is telling his disciples how to confront and how to approach the matter of settling disputes and arguments between members of the congregation.

The first step, he tells them is for the member who was sinned against to point out the wrong that the other member did to them, in private...without involving anyone else. Now if the wrongdoer listens and reconciles, then that sheep has been brought back to the fold.

But, if they don't listen, the member who was sinned against, Jesus says, should then include one or two others so that the evidence of wrongdoing is on the table and can be confirmed by more witnesses (and under Jewish law, this was a legal requirement back then), and hopefully this would help in leading to their reconciliation.

Now if the offender still wouldn't listen, the member who was sinned against could then involve the church, in the hopes that the community as a whole might help the offender finally listen and reconcile.

I wonder if you can tell by now...that the point that Jesus is trying to make to his disciples is that the point of disciplining is not to berate...it is not to make the most out of making the other person feel bad or guilty about their sin...it is not to hit them over the head with their mistakes to make one's self feel better or more self-righteous...that is not the point at all...the point of disciplining...of confronting the offender...is to help them recognize and acknowledge their sin...to recognize that their sin has caused a break in the relationship between themselves and their brother or sister in Christ as well as the relationship between themselves and God. And, the whole point of confronting the other is not to berate but to reconcile not only with the one they've wronged...but to help them reconcile their relationship with God and help lead them back into the loving, forgiving and open arms of God, just as a lost sheep might be held in joy by the shepherd who was seeking and found him.

But if the offender still refuses to reconcile...refuses to acknowledge their sin and the harm they are causing the community, after all the opportunities they've been given to help them become reconciled...then and only then, Jesus told his disciples, the church should treat the offender as a Gentile...an outsider...someone who is no longer a part of the church. Now, this may seem harsh, but he says this because then it becomes a point in which the shepherd must step forward to protect his flock. When you consider Jesus' words earlier in the Gospel of Matthew in verses 6-7 when he says "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!"

The early church, which Jesus and his disciples were building, in many ways was a new and vulnerable entity...especially in light of the many other religions that were prevalent at the time, Jesus knew it would not always be easy for his followers to follow the Christian path. And, coming from various backgrounds and lands, Christians would also be challenged in following God when others around them would not. To be Christian is not easy...because to be Christian is to follow the path that Christ has laid before us...we not only have all of Christ's teachings and the 10 commandments to guide us, but in our second reading of the day, in Paul's letter to the Romans, he states that yes, one should fulfill the law...follow the commandments...and that all of these can be summed up in one sentence to "love your neighbor as yourself". All of the commandments we've been given...the path of Christ that we walk as Christians...it all comes down to loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

So, when Jesus spoke to his disciples about how to confront sinners in the church...how to discipline them...they were to approach every opportunity provided for reconciliation not with a heart darkened by anger or self-righteousness but by a heart lightened by love...a heart armored with the light of love...love was to be the guiding force...love was to inform the decisions they made...love for their neighbor, love for the other...love for those hurting by the sin they are enslaved to...

The church that Jesus was building, so that the world would come to know and worship his Father, was a church armored in light where love, forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption and salvation are within everyone's reach. Even those who have been excommunicated and no longer part of the fold, are still within reach of God's forgiveness and salvation, as the imagery of the lost sheep being found in Matthew suggests that the church community should spare no effort to win them back. Jesus told his disciples that his gathered church as a whole has power, especially in prayer...and I would imagine that Paul might say that a church united in the armored light of love, has power. For, Jesus said, that "whatever they bind on earth is bound in heaven and whatever is loosed here on earth will be loosed in heaven"...and he promised that wherever two or three are gathered in his name, he would be there among them...and if two or three of them agreed on earth about anything they asked, God would hear them and fulfill their needs. And these promises that Jesus makes are given within the context of the church community trying to engender peace, forgiveness and reconciliation. As Jesus spoke to his disciples, he wanted them to understand that church discipline had to be done within the context of prayer and Jesus' teachings...yes, his gathered followers had power, but decisions made within the church had to include the presence and love of God...and Paul clarifies how the church should act when he tells them that the priority is to love their neighbor as much as they love themselves.

Paul also went on to tell the Roman church in his letter that "salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers"...and how "now is the moment for you to wake from sleep"....and lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light"...to in a sense, "put on the Lord, Jesus Christ"...and "live our lives honorably". Paul may have been writing to the Roman church but his words are speaking to us now.

Yes, we must follow God's commandments...yes we must follow Jesus' teachings...and if it is all summed up by loving our neighbors as ourselves, by letting the selfless love of God be the guiding force in our lives...I have to ask you, are you letting God's love guide you in your lives? Are the relationships in your lives whole? Do you need forgiveness for some sin, or do you need to forgive someone else? And, until we do, how can our relationship with God be whole? None of us are free from sin...but that doesn't mean that we can't recognize where sin has taken hold in our lives and come forward to God Himself and ask for forgiveness, doing our part to reconcile with our Lord.

It is not easy for a community to always be at peace...and Jesus knew this. Jesus knew human nature...and he knew that in any community, there are bound to be disagreements and arguments at some point...he knew people, even within his own church, might say or do something to hurt others or cause them to stumble in their faith... and he wanted to prepare his disciples on how to deal with these issues within the church...because once He was gone, they would be the shepherds of his church...and it would be their job to ensure that their individual flocks be tended, to go after any lost sheep and guide them towards reconciliation, or if necessary for the welfare of the flock, to let go of any sheep who caused others to stumble and refused to reconcile and live in peace in their community and with God.

I struggled with writing this sermon today. Understanding that Jesus was trying to build a church where the amazing grace and love of God is the guiding force of the church...a church whose diverse members the apostle Paul implored to put on the armor of light...to put on Christ...and let love lead the way...I struggled because I have heard of too many stories of people calling themselves Christians in our world who have somehow managed to miss the heart of what it means to be a Christian...to love our neighbor as ourselves...Christians who seem to only extend that love to certain people, excluding all others... Christians who let their prejudices inform their judgments, decisions and actions, instead of letting love lead the way.

Seeing the turmoil of all that is going on in the US, the country in which I grew up and still love, even though I too occasionally felt racism directed at me there simply because of the color of my skin...knowing that whereas before racism was there lurking in the background and darkness, now there are those who proudly and quite loudly are letting their prejudices and hatred come out of the shadows and into the light of day...I struggled because among those spouting hateful and contemptuous words and acts of racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia...are those who would also consider themselves Christian....Christians who are supposed to love their neighbor, not hurt them. The apostle Paul even went so far as to say in his letter to the Romans that "love does no wrong to a neighbor." But as Jesus said, "Woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes". As Christians, we are meant to love...and our actions here on earth matter, especially when the world sees how we act as Christians and hear what we say in this world. As Jesus said, together, as a community of believers, we have power, but as his children, we are also accountable to God...our words, our prayers, and our actions have power when they are guided by God's love...and that is what we should be guided by...by the love and light of God, not by our fears, not by our prejudices or judgments, not by our skewed notions of righteousness...for we are not the creators of this world. The world belongs to God...we are merely caretakers of it.

So therefore, I ask you like Paul did, to put on the armor of light, of God's love, of Christ himself...to live good lives and care for this world and for one another, no matter our differences, loving and forgiving one another as God loves and forgives us.

Amen.