

# “This Ministry of Reconciliation”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina

January 18, 2009

**Text: “All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” (II Corinthians 5:18)**

Recently I came across an article in “Theology Matters” by Dr. Thomas Gillespie entitled “The Pastoral Dilemma.” The context of this article has to do with the present debate in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) about the ordination of active gay people, but it has broader implication. It has to do with how we deal with people who are in some way different from us, whether it be political, economic, racial, or even with regard to sexual orientation. In his article Gillespie quotes from a scholar named Thomas E. Schmidt who reminds us of the personal dimension of these issues.

“These are people with faces, people with names, often Christian people, and whatever we conclude about the larger issues their stories represent, we must never lose sight of their individual struggles, their individual pain, their faces. If we neglect faces, we neglect the gospel.”

## I.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the congregation at Corinth, speaks about what he calls a ministry of reconciliation. This is a text that is not only central to the gospel, it is central to the mission of the church.

Now, let me say something about the church at Corinth. It was as difficult a church as any one could imagine. Situated on the narrow isthmus that connects Greece proper with the Peloponnesus, it was a major city for trade and shipping. As a sea port, it attracted a great diversity of sailors and their religions as well: Isis and Serapis from Egypt, Astarte from Syria, and Artemis from Ephesus, just to name a few. It was as divided as any church could be. There were warring factions in the church—the party of Apollos, the party of Peter, the party of Paul, and even the party of Christ.

There were all kinds of immorality in the church at Corinth. One member of the church was having a sexual relationship with his stepmother. Other people were using the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a means to engage in drunkenness and the separation between the rich and the poor.

It was, however, to these people that Paul wrote about a ministry of reconciliation, a ministry of bringing people together who were separated from one another. The secret to that, according to Paul, was to be found in the fact that God, through the death of Christ, had reconciled the world to himself. That is the gospel we proclaim. That is the mission in which we seek to engage.

## II.

Paul Tillich once pointed out that there are few words stranger to us than "sin" and "grace." They are strange, in part, because they are well-known. They are strange because they are often used in a shallow and hollow way. But they are essential words to understanding not only our faiths, but our lives as well and without them the vocabulary of faith is greatly impoverished.

Now, to be sure, the Bible speaks of sin in many ways. It is sometimes spoken of in the New Testament with the little Greek word "amartos," which means missing the mark. But it is spoken of in other ways as well. Sin is disobedience, pride, oppression, the failure to do good - the list goes on. One of the most helpful ways of understanding sin is to understand it as "separation." As such, it has a threefold dimension. It is our separation from God. It is our separation from one another. It is our separation from ourselves.

Grace, on the other hand, is the reunion of life with life, the reconciliation of the self with God. It changes guilt into confidence and courage.

So, how does a person understand this separation and reunion?

## III.

In the first place, we are separated from our creator. One of the key elements of our Reformed faith is our belief that we are greatly separated from God. Karl Barth once spoke of the distance between God and us as an infinite qualitative distance.

Someone recently asked me why in the Presbyterian Church we make our prayers in the name of Jesus. The answer to that is this distance between God and ourselves. It is like a huge chasm that one cannot cross, except by a bridge. And that bridge is Jesus Christ. He is the mediator. He intercedes for us. Apart from him we find God unapproachable.

On one occasion the Apostle Paul observed that "where sin abounds, grace abounds even more." I don't think he said those words to be sentimental or even to say that there is a happy ending to every situation. He said those words because he had experienced this separation between God and himself. But in the picture of Jesus as the Christ, which appeared to him on the road to Damascus, he found himself accepted in spite of being rejected.

Sometimes, in the midst of great suffering, we feel ourselves separated from God. In those times, God seems so far away. And yet, though it seems that our suffering hides us from the face of God, it is not our suffering but our sin that separates us from God.

#### IV.

But this separation is not just the separation we experience from God. It is the separation we experience from those around us. Sometimes we experience it even in those relationships which are the closest to us—husband from wife, parent from child, best friend from best friend.

This Sunday is the Sunday that we have designated in our Presbytery as “Race Relations Sunday” and truly, this is an historic week in the United States. On Tuesday, we will inaugurate as President Barack Obama, who will be the first African American president our country has elected to this office.

Tomorrow we celebrate the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On the night before Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968 he told his audience of something that had happened to him early in his public ministry. He was in New York City for a book signing. As he was sitting at a desk autographing books for people, a demented woman came up to him and asked, “Are you Martin Luther King?” Without looking up, King replied, “Yes.” In the next minute he felt a great pain in his chest. When he looked down, he realized that he had been stabbed with a knife in the chest. King was quickly rushed to Harlem hospital. When he got on the operating table, the doctors saw that the blade had gone through his chest, and the x-rays revealed that the tip of the blade was on the edge of his aorta. Had that artery been punctured, he would have been dead.

King survived the attack but in the next morning’s *New York Times*, the surgeon that attended him said that had Dr. King even sneezed, he would have died.

While he was in the hospital, King received a lot of attention. He received a letter from the President of the United States and the Vice President as well. He was visited by the governor of New York. King said, however, that the thing that meant the most to him was a letter he received from a young girl who was a student at the White Plains High School in White Plains, New York. In that letter she wrote, “Dear Dr. King. I am a ninth grade student at the White Plains High School.” She went on to say that “While it shouldn’t matter, I want to mention that I am a white girl.” Then she wrote that she had read in the paper of the terrible attack he had suffered and she had read the report of the doctor that had King sneezed, he would have died. She concluded her letter by saying that she was writing to say how happy she was that he didn’t sneeze.

Well, I am glad that he didn’t sneeze either. Because if he had, I don’t know who would have led that movement that changed our country. If he had sneezed, I don’t know who would have made that speech at the Lincoln Memorial in the summer of 1963, or who would have led the March on Selma, Alabama in 1965.

We certainly have a long way to go in terms of race relations in this country, but we also have a lot to be grateful for in terms of those who have helped to overcome the terrible legacy of slavery and segregation.

## V.

There is, however, another kind of separation that we speak of this morning. It is not separation between us and our creator or even the great separation that divides us from other people. We are also separated from ourselves.

Some years ago, Dr. Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled *Man Against Himself* in which he noted the terrible split that occurs within all of us. Dr. Menninger noted that life moves against itself through aggression, hatred, and despair. We often deplore people who are filled with self-love, but the truth of the matter is that what often parades as self-love is in fact self-hatred. It is this mixture of selfishness and self-hatred that prevents us from loving other people and that allows us to love ourselves. The person is able to love himself is the person who is able to love others. In fact, until we overcome the contempt of self that exists in all of us, we will never be able to overcome our contempt for others. Menninger points out that there is in each of us not only an instinct of self-preservation, but one of self-destruction as well.

The Apostle Paul understood this. In his letter to the church at Rome he wrote, "For I do not do the good I desire, but rather the evil that I do not desire." The Apostle sensed this split between his conscious will and his real will, between himself and something strange and alien within him.

## VI.

That is why I want to return to the words that I quoted a few minutes ago when St. Paul, in his letter to the church at Rome, wrote "Where sin abounded, grace did abound much more."

That is where the ministry of reconciliation begins. It begins when we experience God's grace as God's love for us that we do not deserve. It does not mean that we suddenly believe that God exists, or the Jesus is the savior, or that the Bible is the word of God.

On the contrary, grace often strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It often strikes us when we walk through some deep valley of a meaningless and empty life.

It strikes us when in a moment of great revelation, we fully understand that we are "accepted by God." It strikes us when we realize that we who deserve God's great displeasure have actually received his love. It strikes us when we realize that because God loves us, we are finally free to love God, to love our neighbor and to love ourselves.

When that moment comes, our lives are transformed and they will never be the same again. It is not mean we will no longer sin. We will. It does not mean we will never struggle. We will.

It does mean, however, that we are a “new creation” and that the old has passed away and that the new has come.

That is the gospel we proclaim. That is the ministry of reconciliation that undergirds everything we do in this church. We love because God loves us. We serve God in this community, not to seek God’s favor, but because we know his infinite mercy for us.

“Sin” and “Grace” are strange words. But they are not strange things. They are a part of everything we do. Sin is a very powerful force and we should not underestimate. But it is not nearly as powerful as grace for grace is of God and grace has the power to transform all our lives.

Amen.