

SERMON APRIL 8, 2018

[Adomnan's *Life of St. Columba* II,39; Psalm 133; I John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-21]
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Collect of the Day: Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen

I suppose a preacher should not admit to having difficulty putting a sermon together; but, since I am here among friends, I am free to admit that I have had *great difficulty* with this sermon. For some time, now, I have been feeling the Spirit's prompt to preach on *reconciliation*, but I have not known how to proceed. So, I am asking you to bear with me! Let me tell you what I have been wrestling with and I will trust the Holy Spirit to sort out what it is we need to hear.

When I first looked at the lessons appointed for this second Sunday of Easter, what jumped out at me was the Collect and especially these two phrases: "the new covenant of reconciliation" and "the fellowship of Christ's body." I noticed that "the new covenant of reconciliation" has been established by God in the Paschal mystery – that glorious mystery which we have just celebrated and which we celebrate each Sunday. And I noticed the fervent prayer that we "who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's body may show forth in our lives what we profess by our faith."

Before I explain why these two phrases captured my attention, we need to begin with a definition of reconciliation. Simply put, reconciliation means the coming together in agreement of two or more persons after some misunderstanding or estrangement with the result being oneness and unity. Reconciliation is all about the restoration of relationship: the restoration of harmony where there has been discord, affection where there has been dis-affection, wholeness where there has been division. To use a term found in our Gospel lesson, reconciliation means the restoration of "peace"-- the *Shalom* that Jesus alone can give.

Many of us probably have experienced this estrangement to one degree or another, and I am no exception. In 2004 I went through a divorce and, ever since then, one of my close relatives has refused to speak to me. We used to be quite close, visiting in each other's homes, calling each other on our birthdays, and generally keeping up with each other's lives and the lives of our children. But that relationship has been broken. Over the years I have called on their birthday, I have sent emails, and I have sent letters, including letters asking for forgiveness and asking what it is that prevents us

from being reconciled – all to no avail. There is nothing I can do; but I have *not* given up hope. I still want reconciliation. I still want our fellowship to be restored. I will keep trying; but the relationship is broken and may *not* be restored in this life.

Now, we could talk for a long time about the various wondrous effects of “the new covenant of reconciliation” established in the death and resurrection of Jesus: we could talk about reconciliation between each individual and God; or, reconciliation between individuals -- racial or ethnic reconciliation; or, reconciliation between humans and creation; or even the reconciliation of all things within creation, so that the lion and the lamb can lie down together, as Isaiah says. But I want us to focus our attention this morning on personal reconciliation between individuals, the reconciliation Jesus refers to in Matthew 5: “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.” Interesting that we are called to take the initiative to be reconciled with the person who has something against us. But that’s a subject for another time.

So, why *did* those phrases – “the new covenant of reconciliation” and “the fellowship of Christ’s body” – capture my attention when I read the Collect for today? Here is the reason. From my personal observations and from several things I have heard, I am aware, painfully aware, of the need for reconciliation and the restoration of fellowship, *not* just in our world, which is certainly true, but here at Saint Augustine’s – reconciliation between members of Christ’s body *here*. I confess that when we get to the Prayer of the People which asks, “My brothers and sisters, is there anything else for which we should pray?”, I find myself praying for reconciliation in this place, not least, because we are moving into a future together at Saint Augustine’s that is still unknown. Now, there is an irony here because “reconciliation” is one of the four core values that we print at the top of each Sunday’s worship bulletin; but I wonder how well we have done reconciliation with each other, so that the fellowship of Christ’s body is restored and maintained?

To return to the Collect for a moment, we heard Nigel address God as the God “who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation.” It is the glorious mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus, my friends, that has opened up the possibility for reconciliation in all its forms. The apostle Paul understood this when he wrote to the Corinthians, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, *in*

Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” [2 Cor. 5:17-19] Whatever else Easter may mean, it means that the reconciliation of all those estranged from God has been made possible in a new and powerful way.

Now, what we may miss here is that our reconciliation with God in Christ is meant to *transform* us into *agents of reconciliation*, not only agents who *announce* the reconciliation established in the Paschal mystery, but persons who *actively seek* reconciliation with those from whom we are estranged. Those of us who have been part of Saint Augustine’s for several years know that some members of our local body of Christ, who were once regular participants in our fellowship, are now, for various reasons, seldom or hardly ever seen here. We have lost contact with them – our fellowship with them has been broken – we have lost part of our own body and we are estranged. I feel this estrangement and I know some of you do, too.

I believe Bill Skubi was speaking in the Spirit when he said in his sermon on February 28, “We need to generously extend forgiveness and reconciliation to any of our brothers and sisters who have felt compelled to leave our fellowship.” Bill speaks for me, too. I would only add there also needs to be reconciliation between some of us who have never left. In his Holy Week reflection on Good Friday, Nigel wrote about “letting go of our need for a traitor, for someone to blame, [which] is a skill that we under-use in our lives; perhaps a place to start practicing that skill is with forgiving Judas, and then thinking of those in our own lives whom we have failed to forgive – and forgive them, too.” Nigel speak for me, too.

Now, the lessons that we have heard read this morning speak clearly to these issues. The story from Adomnan’s *Life of Saint Columba* tells how Columba helped a man named Libran to become reconciled with the relative he had wronged before he left Ireland. The result was that Libran was able to serve God as a monk in one of Columba’s monasteries in Scotland. The Epistle and the Gospel attributed to the Apostle John, who was so beloved by the Celtic Christians, also speak to these issues. John the Evangelist refers to the Peace – the harmony, the fellowship – that Jesus offers his disciples after his resurrection. Speaking of that same Peace, that same fellowship, the writer of First John writes, “If we say that we have fellowship with Jesus Christ while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true.” That’s pretty strong language! But it makes clear that “having fellowship” and “walking in darkness” are mutually exclusive.

Now, the writer of First John does not spell out what is meant by walking in darkness, but I think we know what it means in our own situation: walking in darkness means refusing to forgive those whom we believe have wronged us; walking in darkness means charging others with betrayal of our fellowship because they have chosen a different way from the way we have chosen; walking in darkness means not accepting the reconciliation offered to us by others-- to hold on to the hurt which we have suffered. Such walking in darkness, my dear friends, destroys fellowship; it disturbs the peace of Christ's body; it disrupts the harmony of our life together; and it only increases darkness rather than bringing light.

Have you ever noticed that the forgiveness we receive from God in Christ is bound inextricably together with the forgiveness that we are to offer each other? We can see this in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" or, as we will say in a moment, using the version of the Lord's prayer written by John Philip Newell, "Pardon our falseness as we forgive those who are untrue to us." Forgiveness is *not* a one-way transaction that ends with me; the forgiveness that I have received from God must be handed on – I must offer it to anyone who has been untrue to me. Only then do I myself experience true forgiveness and reconciliation with God. It really *is* about *us* and how we forgive, or do not forgive – how we let go of hurt, or we choose to continue to hold onto it. *We must* reach out to each other.

The *good news* is that we are not left without a remedy for this situation. First John says plainly, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." [1 John 1:9] And there is *even more good news*: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may *not* sin. But if anyone *does* sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." [1 John 2:1] Just think of that! We have Jesus himself as our Advocate, to act as our lawyer to plead our cause with God to offer us the forgiveness Jesus won for us in his death and resurrection.

This is our Advocate's altar. This is where we confess our sins. This is where we receive forgiveness for ourselves which we may share with others. This is where we receive strength for the journey and the power to "show forth in our lives what we profess by our faith." So, we are back to the Collect for today, which I would like to pray once more. [see Collect above]