

March 17, 2019
Rev. Jane Florence
Title: "Salvation as Reconciliation"
Text: 2 Cor 5: 16-20



My father was a department store manager. His children took turns working for him at the store. By junior high, I worked holidays doing gift wrap. By early high school, I was working in the office. I spent most of the time making change for the sales floor. We had the old tube systems, whereby the sales clerks on the floor would write up the tickets and put them along with the customer's money into a canister and send it up to the office that overlooked the sales floor via a suction tube- kinda like the drive-throughs at the banks today. It sounds ancient; they were antiquated even in the 1970s.

The cans would slide onto the tray on the counter in front of me where I would make change either in dollars or pesos; the store was about two blocks from the Mexico border. I would post the sales to the appropriate departments: mens, ladies, shoes, fabrics, etc. When I say post the sales, I mean write them down on a yellow legal pad with lines drawn for columns. At the end of the day, I would total each column on the adding machine and enter the amount in the appropriate box on the daily report. Then the money was counted and recorded in its appropriate square on the report; then the lines down and the lines across would be compared. It all had to come out even. By even, Dad meant "even." If it were off even a few cents, the few cents would be found. I would have been happier to drop a nickel in the till than to hunt five cents on a yellow legal pad for hours, but hunt five cents was the right way. The columns had to end up even – in line with one another with the same amounts- the accounts had to be reconciled as they say in the bookkeeping world. I did not enter the bookkeeping world by profession, but in the theology world, I encountered reconciliation language again.

Scripture notices that humanity was created good, balanced, aligned with the Divine. Humans were created to care for one another- to share the same Divine Spirit, the same breath of the Holy One. Scripture also notices that humanity has missed the mark, wandered off course, has lost balance with the Divine. Humanity is no longer aligned properly to see the same Spirit in all. We are consumed with our own fears, greed, judgment, violence. We live out of our fears. We fear scarcity, so we hoard up for ourselves. We fear we aren't good enough, so we continually look for someone that we can be better than. We fear we might be wrong, so we point out how others must be wrong. We constantly set up hurdles of what we must do and what others must do to be valued and acceptable. Others must think like us, act like us, vote like us, believe like us. We

think all others must belong to the same denomination, same religion, same country, same political party. We even go so far as to expect People to look a certain way: certain hair color, certain skin color, achieve a certain, height and weight to be acceptable. Paul says when we do this we are seeing one another from a human point of view. He writes “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view.”

I confess that I frequently find myself out of alignment of godly vision of others. I don't see everyone from a godly perspective. My 'human eyes' blind me to God's vision often. I know there is a spark of the Divine seeded in every single person, but I sometimes neglect to look for it seeing instead only the surface. Now more than ever when schisms tear us apart in every arena of life, I often see others from a human point of view. Politics fosters great divisions these days. Where there once was civil dialogue and lively, respectful debate, now there is disrespect and hostility. The UMC General Conference gathered Methodists from around the globe in what could have been a beautiful global tapestry of creation turned into words of shame and hurt. I felt no godly view in their language. Families are split; friends offend; worshipers die in New Zealand; immigrants starve on our deserts, conflict abounds in our world.

We read where Paul writes about reconciliation. However, the Christian baptismal vow includes a promise to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever form we encounter it, and I believe no one needs to remain in abusive relationships. So, what is 'reconciliation' when separation is sometimes the only safe way forward? Therein lies the tension. How do we resist evil, injustice and oppression without letting those things take root in our soul, how to do so with eyes of godly love?

If anyone told you that following the teachings of Jesus would be easy, they lied. If it appears easy to be a Christian, then we aren't paying attention. Matthew's Jesus teaches, “don't worry and don't judge one another.” That certainly is not easy. For that's what we do when we see only from a human perspective gazing on outward appearances.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, a community of Jesus followers that was notorious for their conflict, Paul writes, “regard no one from a human point of view” (see one another through godly eyes). God has given us “the ministry of reconciliation, so we are ambassadors for Christ.” We are to see beneath exteriors, and we are to reflect God's love through our own.

The passage seems to be a tale as old as time - true as it can be - just like Beauty and the Beast. A parable written in 1740 and remade so many times over whose origin can be traced at least to 2nd century Roman myths if not earlier.¹ This tale continues to be told

¹ <http://www.pookpress.co.uk/project/beauty-and-the-beast-history/>

and retold on screen from Shallow Hal who wants a gal and finds her in the inner beauty of a woman who does not meet social expectations of beauty to this year's movie, I Feel Pretty, when Amy Schumer's character struggles with her own outward appearance. The story lives through human generations as each author tries to teach us to look beneath the exterior to true essence of self and all others. It isn't easy to reconcile the inward soul and the outward projections

John Wesley and the Apostle Paul would suggest that we learn to see one another not through the eyes of judgment and fear, but we see one another through the eyes of our baptismal waters that names the grace of God present with all beings. Those are the eyes that can reconcile our imperfections and others with our true nature in the Divine. Reconciliation is a process of transformation. It is not mandatory, immediate forgiveness and return to abusive relationships. It is not denying the pain or disagreements we have with one another. It is not pretending that we aren't heartbroken at the tragedies in life. It is not condemning ourselves for our imperfections. Reconciliation isn't resigned to live in brokenness; it is about transforming brokenness into wholeness.

Paul often contrast the way we are before this transformation and the way we become as we grow into this new way of being. As we become reconciled, realigned, or justified, we became different, what Paul calls, a new creation." It is about seeing a vision of new possibilities for all God's people. It is not something we do by our own might. Our faith tradition teaches that we are realigned with the Divine- by God's grace- we call it Justifying grace. We are made right by God's doing not our own efforts.

It is God who does this reconciliation, God who creates us to see all others a new; however, it is a participatory process. We must retrain our vision, guided by God's presence. We call that sanctifying grace. Wesley said we are going on to perfection- perfect love, perfect sight. So our reconciliation has already occurred and is always in process as we participate in Godly love for all each day.

One way we can practice our ministry of reconciliation is through intentionality in our daily awareness. Asking ourselves each day/ or night/ or moment: Where is God in this moment? Where do I ask God to change my vision today? Where can I ask God to open my eyes with a little more grace? to work for a little more justice? What can I see in others when I look at them through God's love? Can I see their meanness as a witness to their own pain? Can I see their hatred of others as a signal of their own fears? Perhaps even harder, can I begin to look at myself with those new, godly, graceful eyes also.

Paul continues this passage by quoting from Isaiah "Now, is the day of our salvation." In opening ourselves to awareness of God's presence in our moments, we too

can proclaim, “now, is the day of our salvation.” Each day as we look a little deeper from the perspective of God’s all compassionate way, we live “now as the day of our salvation.”

The way of salvation is one that brings us into balance with our Creator and one another. Saving us from a life out of alignment with God, out of balance with ourselves, out of congruence with our neighbors; salvation is saved for a life of abundance aligned with the divine goodness. It takes a lifetime of practice each day. It is not easy; it is essential. May we journey into new seeing and being knowing we are reconciled in God’s grace. Amen.