

“Reaching Across the Aisle”
2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2 – February 10, 2016

We are a people who don't easily reach across aisles. Congress doesn't seem to find it easy to do that either, and in an election year we may not even reach across the aisle within the same political party. Our differences and our long held grudges may become barriers to reconciliation and living together in peaceful ways.

Tosa Clergy took turns today standing on the Starbucks corner for Ashes to Go. As people would walk up to receive ashes, we would ask them if they had any prayer requests. People asked for prayers for family members, folks they knew who were dealing with health issues and many requested prayers for peace. One person said something like, “I just hope for more peaceful times. I'm a Democrat and I find so many people from my own party saying angry, hateful things about Republicans. And another person: “I'd like us to learn to live together better. I'm a Republican and there are so many Republicans right now saying awful things about Democrats.” So here we are, in February of what could become a very long year by the time we reach November.

And yet here and there, we break through barriers, walls that may have been present for a very long time. With our two congregations meeting in the same building, in our small way, we may be helping to break down some walls. Many of us grew up at a time when Roman Catholics and Protestants didn't mix much, and absolutely didn't worship together, or heaven forbid, marry each other. Yet we've reached across those long established aisles and have found friends on the other side of the aisle.

The Israeli cabinet voted this past week, to establish a permanent space where women and non-Orthodox Jews can pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. American rabbis and a group called Women of the Wall have been lobbying for the change for years. Sixteen years ago the government began allowing women to pray at a makeshift site nearby. (*The Week*, 2/12/16)

The new proposal allows access through the main plaza and calls for a new space where men and women can pray together. And yes, Orthodox Jews aren't pleased, but many people believe these changes are the right thing to do.

In two days Pope Francis and the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church are planning to meet in Cuba, a historic step to heal the 1000 year-old schism that divided Christianity between East and West. The meeting will be the first ever between the leaders of the Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches, which split during the Great Schism in 1054. The two churches have remained estranged over a host of issues, including the primacy of the pope and Russian Orthodox accusations that the Catholic Church is poaching converts in Russia. The recent persecution of Christians—Catholic and Orthodox alike—in the Middle East and Africa, has had the effect of bringing the two churches closer together. (*Journal Sentinel*, 2/6/16)

In so many ways, we need each other. And in lots of situations, we must find ways to reach across aisles that may be centuries old, to see what we can do to repair relationships among God's people. Tonight we hear the words from the Epistle which speak of reconciliation, and they are words I think, which fit easily into the context of our lives.

New Testament scholar Richard Hays says that the interesting thing about the word "reconciliation" in ordinary Greek usage is that it is not typically a religious term. "Rather, it is a word drawn from the sphere of politics; it refers to dispute resolution."

The apostle Paul says that God "reconciled us to God through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18). God has worked through Christ to resolve a dispute with us, repairing the relationship that had been broken by our sinful actions. The work of reconciliation has been started by God, and now Christians are challenged to offer a ministry of reconciliation, resolving disputes between individuals and communities. (*Homiletics*)

Eugene Peterson's interpretation of 5:20b is not far off, "Become friends with God; God's already a friend with you."

We do this, says Hays, using "practices that show unity, love, mercy, forgiveness and a self-giving grace that the world (might) not even dream of apart from Christ."

This is a message that the highly polarized and fractured Christian community in Corinth needed to hear, and that we need to hear as well. Our dispute resolution might mean to “make right that which is wrong. To reach out and embrace someone in understanding and love, someone we consider an enemy (someone on the other side of the aisle).” (*Homiletics*)

It may mean taking something that is broken and making it more whole, or somehow finding new life in that brokenness.

In Robert Fulghum's book, *It was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*, he describes Alexander Papaderos, teacher of Greek culture, politician, doctor of philosophy and a resident of Athens. On the island of Crete, next to the mass graves of Germans and Cretans who fought each other so bitterly in World War II where the stone of hatred is hard and thick, Papaderos has founded an institute for peace which has become the source of bridge-building between the people of those two countries.

What kind of vision motivates a man like Papaderos to dedicate his life to compassion and peace? What he said was: "When I was a small child, during the war we were poor and lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece.... By scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine - in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find. I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became [mature], I grew to understand that this was a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light, truth, understanding, knowledge - is there, and it will shine in many dark places only if I reflect it. I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of the world...and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise' (Fulghum, pp.176-77)

Out of the brokenness of World War II, something new has come to life so that healing and understanding could happen.

There is a place on the west coast of Scotland, in the middle of Loch Leven. It's called the Island of Discussion. Feuding parties, people who were quarreling or argumentative were taken out to this small island and left there, a place so small there's no place to go to get off by yourself. They couldn't leave until the dispute was settled, until there was some kind of reconciliation or mutual agreement. They were left there with cheese, oat cakes, and whiskey, to sort out their differences. In over 1500 years, there has been only one recorded murder in the area. So maybe the island is a positive force in their community.

Well, we don't have the situation where we're sent off to an island along with those from whom we may be estranged. But it might be good if we did. For as Christ's followers, the work of reconciliation has been started by God, and now that work is ours. And whether we have cheese, oat cakes and whiskey on hand, or not, we are still to try and reach across the many aisles in our lives, some wider than others, to find new ways to live together on this big earth island we call home.

--Sue Burwell