

Reconciling the World to Himself

A sermon preached by the Very Rev. James A. Diamond at the opening of the service of the North American Conference of Cathedral Deans at St. John's Cathedral, Jacksonville, Florida, on Sunday, April 27, 2006.

Thank you very much Dean Edward Harrison for your invitation to open the conference with this sermon and for the privilege of preaching in this pulpit, for the beautiful music of the choir and for this marvelous new antiphonal organ. Before I continue I wish to acknowledge the Very Rev. Juan Ramon de la Paz, the Dean of the Cathedral in Havana, Cuba, and his wife and priest assistant, Nerva. When the two of you are with us we have a deeper sense of what it means to be gathered as North Americans. I also wish to acknowledge Canon Arthur Spruill and Charlotte Spruill who have been pillars of the Community of the Cross of Nails. Charlotte Spruill is a companion of the Cross of Nails and it is a particular honor to have her with us. I hope that you will have the opportunity to meet the Spruills during this weekend.

“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself
and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

I offer to you a few starting thoughts about reconciliation: first, “to reconcile,” *katalaso* the Greek for “to change mutually.” Second, whereas mediation is a process in which you tell only the truth you must, in order to reach a compromise, reconciliation is a process in which you must tell all the truth as you know it and offer the spiritual dimension of forgiveness. Three, there are distinct ministries of advocacy and reconciliation. For most of us advocacy is the hallmark of our calling. One of you said to me after I had preached for you at your cathedral: I don't like the idea of reconciliation at all! Indeed Jesus spent three years of his recorded ministry as an advocate and only during the Passion did he become the ultimate reconciler.

One way of understanding reconciliation, this mutual change, is to see reconciliation as a dimension of generosity. We understand our relationship to God as that of giver to receiver. We are beneficiaries of God's generosity and to the extent that we remember and hold that awareness, we, who are receivers, are givers in turn.

The theologian Miroslav Volf suggests that we avoid the image of “The God the Negotiator” (if you give me a great cathedral, gorgeous music and a bishop who travels often, - then I will devote myself to your service.) And also to avoid “God the Santa Claus” (from whom all goodies do come with no conditions or strings attached.) Volf turns us towards “God the Creator” who offers us generosity and expectation.

We are generous because God has been generous to us. Take a moment to catalogue what prompts thankfulness in you. It is rarely what you have purchased and far more likely to be the intangibles that include relationships. We all desire to be in relationships and therefore we have all known the longing for forgiveness because forgiveness is the way we mend our frayed and broken relationships.

We forgive because God forgives. A story from Volf and others that comes from rabbinic tradition places forgiveness “in the beginning” with God reasoning: if I create – they will sin. If they sin – I will punish. If I punish – I will destroy. Should I create in order to destroy? And so God wove forgiveness into the fabric of creation. God’s forgiveness, offered before we ask, is at the core of Christian theology and elegantly expressed in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Forgiveness is the highest act of generosity but it is also a complicated act of generosity. Forgiveness as we all know is neither quick nor cheap. It costs to forgive; it costs to receive forgiveness. To forgive is to name and condemn the injury and to cut the tie between the offense and the offender. It is possible to receive forgiveness and be unfazed by it. To be touched, indeed to be changed and transformed by forgiveness requires repentance and the willingness to restore to the victim what has been taken away, that is, to offer restitution. Thus being forgiven requires its own brand of generosity.

From Desmond Tutu’s book *No Future Without Forgiveness* comes the formula: Truth + Forgiveness = Reconciliation. I am overwhelmed by the South African women whose husbands were killed by the white police. These are women who listened to the testimonies and then forgave those police officers during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings that Archbishop Tutu chaired in South Africa. How is that possible? How could these women stand and forgive the killers of their husbands? They could do it because once the crime was named and condemned these women knew that their lives could not be forever defined by their husband’s deaths; their lives needed to be about life and hope and the future of their children.

But reconciliation rarely works so neatly. The crimes of the Holocaust are almost unspeakable. Since the end of World War II, two generations of Germans, under pressure and with encouragement, have told their own grizzly story. But who is there who can forgive the Germans? Where is the next generation of German children to find reconciliation and full welcome into the community of nations?

Some of you know that one of the defining ministries of our cathedral in Cincinnati is racial reconciliation. But all of us in the U.S. are a long way from racial reconciliation. Until we enter a conversation about slavery, about what it means *to have been owned* and *to have owned* one another we will not have named the injury nor condemned it. Until we peel back the layers of our economy built upon the backs of slaves, we will not be ready to repent/forgive and restore.

But even if we are unable to reconcile the largest issues of our day there are many ways that we can be reconcilers with our congregations and within the cities in which we minister. Our cathedrals are an ideal space in which to practice reconciliation. We have a history and tradition of sanctuary and protection and though they might not be Christians or even believers in God, people turn to us for that protection. We also have the possibility of being, in Martin Marty’s words “The Public’s Church.” The cities in which we minister have a claim upon us especially when it is necessary for the city to

practice some form of civil religion. It means that sometimes the liturgies we offer, the songs we sing and the events we commemorate may not seem so very Anglican, but we are serving a legitimate need for our cities. Finally because we are churches, people rely on the safe and holy ground upon which they may walk within our walls, knowing that both safety and respect are there because of who we are and who we serve.

We, who are Deans, can invite those who represent the fragments of a splintered city to come together within our walls. Cathedrals can be places for people who cannot speak to one another publicly to do so privately, out of range of the media and knowing that their exchanges will be kept confidential. Our venerable institutions can use their considerable social capital and the pulpits entrusted to us to urge justice and reconciliation on behalf of those for whom truth is denied. Our cathedrals are value laden and while some of the privilege we symbolize is a burden, we also represent a religious tradition of generosity and forgiveness which provides the spirit within which reconciliation can occur.

Last year in Cincinnati Christ Church Cathedral held a truth and reconciliation hearing. During several hours of testimony we heard people tell the stories of their lives and how race was such a determining factor in the unfolding of their lives. The director of our Human Rights Commission talked about how he had moved from Texas with his family when he was a very young child. He came to Cincinnati and grew up discovering what it meant to be black and a Cincinnatian. Sometime later a member of the Cathedral congregation stood up filled with emotion and said that she had a confession and that she was in need of forgiveness. She talked about growing up with a father who was a member of the Klu Klux Klan. She talked about how it affected her as a child, as a young woman bringing home the man whom she was to marry, and how it impacted her children as they grew up. She described traveling with her father who was in her words “a good old boy” who would sidle up to others and make the assumption that they, too, shared his values and might also be members of the Klan. The room was hushed. People held their breath and then the director of the Human Rights Commission stood again and said that he had not told us his whole story. He had come to Cincinnati as a child from Texas because his father was chased out of Texas by the Klan. He turned to the woman who had spoke and said, “I forgive your father and I forgive you,” thereby cutting the tie between the offense, the offender and the offender’s daughter.

Yesterday afternoon I had lunch with a Brigadier General in the Military Chaplains’ Corps. He told me about one of the recent funerals he attended for a young man who had died in Iraq. At the end of the service he brought the American flag, folded in a triangle as we do at our military funerals, and presented it to the mother of the dead soldier with the words “On behalf of the President of the United States and a grateful nation we thank you for your great sacrifice...” The mother took the flag from him. She stood there for a moment facing the general. Then she slapped him. She stood for another moment and then she slapped him again. By this time the military officers who were also in attendance at the funeral started to become alarmed; this was, after all a general officer who was being slapped by this woman. The mother slapped the general a third time so hard that his hat fell off. They looked at one another and he took her in his arms and she wept uncontrollably.

As I heard the general repeat this story to me, filled with his own emotions of that moment, I wondered how we Americans are ever going to reconcile our war in Iraq with that mother and all the other parents whose children have died in Iraq in the last three years.

Reconciliation leaves us in a neutral zone between hostility and friendship, as Miroslav Volf frames it, between exclusion and embrace. Our hope for a better future lies in the forging of communal bonds between each other, between the forgiver and the forgiven. Many of us feel trapped by the question: do I seek justice and then offer a relationship, or establish the relationship and then obtain justice? Do I offer forgiveness and then seek the embrace, or do I begin the halting steps of an embrace and pray that forgiveness will follow? There is no one way; there is no right way to reach those who are lost to us.

But this we can know for certain “we cannot embrace a former enemy... without reconciliation; nor can we reconcile, without the hope of friendship.” Amen.

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