

SERMON TITLE: "Meditations on the Cross: The Reconciliation of God"  
SERMON TEXT: 2 Corinthians 5:11 – 6:2  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: April 3, 2022, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

This week some indigenous leaders from Canada met with Pope Francis at the Vatican. Their meetings started on Monday and continued through Friday. The indigenous people hoped that their many conversations with the pope would lead to an official apology for the harm done to native children in the boarding schools that were managed by the Roman Catholic Church. "The former head of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada" has estimated "that more than 6,000 children died or vanished over the decades that the schools were in operation." That's why the indigenous leaders of Canada reached out to Pope Francis and invited him "to join them in a journey for reconciliation." Pope Francis gave them hope, when he responded to their invitation with the three English words: "*truth, justice, and healing.*"<sup>1</sup> Then on Friday, Pope Francis spoke the actual words of apology that the indigenous people had wanted to hear. Acts of reparation and a papal visit and apology on Canadian soil are yet to come. But this week was a significant step toward reconciliation.<sup>2</sup>

Since the beginning of Lent, we've been focusing our worship services on various aspects and understandings of the cross. As we've meditated on the cross from different angles, we've asked ourselves, "Why is the cross so important to our Christian faith? And what exactly happened on the cross that makes our salvation possible?" As we've read from different biblical passages, we've heard a variety of answers. The weakness and foolishness of the cross became the power and wisdom of God. Jesus was lifted up on the cross as a sign of the love of God. Jesus died on the cross as the Lamb of God. And, last Sunday, we heard how Jesus gave himself on the cross as the Great High Priest of God.

Today, I invite you to continue this meditation on the cross with me. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, let's see how the Apostle Paul understands the cross as the reconciliation of God.

### **1--RECONCILIATION OF GOD BEGINS WITH JESUS' DEATH**

As Paul spells it out here in 2 Corinthians, the reconciliation of God begins with Jesus' death. Paul doesn't have to use the word *cross* for his readers to know that's what he's talking about. The fact that Jesus was crucified is quite clear in chapter five, verses 14 and 15, where Paul writes repetitively, "We are convinced that one has died for all . . . and he died for all . . . [and] him who died." From these verses and from Paul's other writings, we know that the apostle believed that Jesus' death made a reconciling difference in the relationship between God and humanity.

There are many different ways to understand the reconciliation that happened on the cross, and Paul himself uses a number of different metaphors. But here, Paul is writing about Jesus' death as a substitution for us. In that sense, Jesus died in our place. He took the punishment that we might otherwise deserve and receive. Paul is using spiritual language, of course. The apostle certainly didn't think that every one of us deserves capital punishment on a cross. But, as he wrote in his letter to the Romans, "all [of us] have sinned and come short of the glory of God."<sup>3</sup> We're all guilty and in need of forgiveness.

In the ancient Jewish faith, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would sacrifice a lamb to atone for sins. The priest would also symbolically place the sins of the people on the head of an unblemished goat and then send that goat out into the wilderness. As the scapegoat ran away, it took away the sins of the people. That's what Paul was talking about in 2 Corinthians 5:21, when he writes, "For our sake, God made him to be sin who knew no sin." Like the scapegoat, Jesus the sinless Son of God took on the burden of punishment for our sins and carried them away to his death on the cross.

### **2--RECONCILIATION OF GOD MAKES POSSIBLE OUR DEATH AND NEW LIFE**

This act of taking away our sins then clears the way for reconciliation between us and God. Christian theologians through the centuries have wondered and debated about whether Jesus' death on the cross changed *God* by some kind of appeasement of God's righteous wrath or whether Jesus' death

more crucially changes *us* human beings. I think we see both of those factors here in Paul's explanation. In 5:19, Paul writes that, "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." To me, that sounds like God was willing to let go of some of those legal judgments against us. Rather than hold to a strict, face-saving rule of law, God's heart was softened.

But our reconciliation to God through the death of Jesus on the cross isn't just a merciful change in *God's* expectations and demands. The reconciliation of God also transforms *us*. Paul says this over and over again in these verses. In 5:14, Paul writes that Jesus' death wasn't just a transaction between Jesus and God. Jesus' died for everyone, so that we might also die with him. That isn't a statement about our physical mortality. That's a statement about our spiritual existence. In Christ's death, our sins are now dead. Our sinful nature is now dead.

That death to sin makes it possible for us to change in a positive way. In 5:15 Paul writes that Jesus "died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised." In verse 16, Paul points out the now-better perspectives of those who believe in Christ. In verse 17, Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" And, in verse 21, Paul indicates that Jesus took on the consequences of our sin "so that, in him, we might become the righteousness of God."

In case his Corinthian readers didn't grasp his message about the change that God wanted to make in their lives, Paul reiterates it one more time with urgency. In chapter six, verses one and two, he tells them, "Don't accept the grace of God in vain." In other words, if you haven't yet allowed God's act of atonement in Jesus' death to change your heart and life, do it today. Today is the day to embrace the salvation God has prepared for you. Today is the day for *you* to be reconciled to God.

### **3--RECONCILIATION OF GOD CALLS FOR OUR NEW LIFE OF RECONCILIATION WITH OTHERS**

The reconciliation of God through Jesus' death on the cross is powerful to bring Christian believers together with God. But the reconciliation of God didn't stop there. Paul's message to the

Corinthians includes one more important aspect. The reconciliation of God also brings people together with each other. Through our common focus on the cross of Christ, through our common experience of death to sin, through our common rebirth to life in righteousness, we come together in purpose and ministry.

It's like our church's vision statement that we read earlier in the service. "First United Methodist Church will meet spiritual needs" . . . How? . . . "by developing relationships with Christ, community, and the world." Reconciliation initiates and restores our vertical relationship with God and Christ. But spiritual reconciliation is also about building and nurturing our horizontal relationships with other people. The reconciliation offered to us through Jesus' death on the cross calls us and urges us into a ministry of forgiving love and compassionate care for those around us, near and far.

We see this message from Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:18 where he writes of their "ministry of reconciliation." In 6:1, he speaks of "working together." Bible scholars tell us that Paul is writing these important words to the Corinthians because they've had some kind of falling out with him. There are some indications of this fractured relationship in chapter five. But it's even more clear in chapter six, verses 11-13. There Paul says, "We have spoken frankly to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return . . . open wide your hearts also."

The reconciliation of God that is available through Jesus' death on the cross is powerful healing medicine for our relationship with God. But it also has the capacity to bring us together as human beings. When each one of us is strengthened by the mercy, love, and cleansing power of God, then we are given the ability to be kinder and more forgiving in our relationships with one another. We are able to think not just about our own interests, but to imagine and see the concerns of others. We are able to meet spiritual needs by developing relationships with Christ, community, and the world.

## **CONCLUSION**

As a Lenten discipline this year, I've been reading a little book based on Christian hymns. In each daily reading, the author focuses on a different song of faith. This week I read about the hymn "All Creatures of Our God and King," which was written by St. Francis of Assisi. You may know that he turned away from his family's wealth and dedicated himself to a life of poverty and ministry with the poor. In his poverty, St. Francis connected deeply with God's creation. That's why the first four verses of his hymn are about the sun, moon, clouds, rain, flowers, and fruits all lifting praise to God. The author of my Lenten devotional book explained that St. Francis and his followers sang these verses as they went about their daily tasks, sometimes inside the city, where others could hear them singing this song.

But then, one day, Francis wrote an additional verse. Francis instructed his friends to sing this fifth verse "in the city square on a certain day, knowing that the bishop and mayor would be there." The two men "had fallen into intense conflict with one another, spewing angry words and flinging accusations." But then the bishop and the mayor heard the Italian or Latin equivalent of "All ye who are of tender heart/ forgiving others, take your part." That message of peace tempered their anger. "After the friars finished their song, [the] two authorities met in the middle, and with 'great kindness and love they embraced and kissed each other.'"<sup>4</sup>

Just as, in the shape of the cross, there's a vertical post and a horizontal beam, so the reconciliation of God repairs relationships between God and us and between us and others. And all of that is made possible through the death of Jesus on the cross. As we continue to meditate on the cross, may we accept and embrace the reconciliation of God.

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<sup>1</sup><https://eedition.sltrib.com/the-salt-lake-tribune/20220331> by Elisabetta Povoledo and Ian Austen.

<sup>2</sup><https://eedition.sltrib.com/the-salt-lake-tribune/20220402> by Nicole Winfield.

<sup>3</sup>Romans 3:23 is actually a paraphrase of Isaiah 53:6, where the prophet speaks of a suffering servant who was "wounded for our transgressions" and was "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter."

<sup>4</sup>James C. Howell, *Unrevealed Until Its Season: A Lenten Journey with Hymns* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2021), pp.127f., who quotes Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 100.