

DRAW THE CIRCLE WIDE - "RIPPLES OF RECONCILIATION"

Ordinary Time

Romans 5:1-11

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Romans 5:1-11¹

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

Last week as part of our first worship series of the summer, "Draw the Circle Wide", we had considered Paul's call to draw the circle wide: "Hear this good news to all of you in Rome, Jew and gentile, Christian and non-Christian to all of you here hear this good news."

And last week and that echo of hospitality and drawing the circle wide that inclusive welcome that runs through Christianity and, yes, is often drowned out by fear and anxiety, we reflected as well that we live in times such as ours that when we hear the call to draw the circle wide, we say, "You've got to be crazy." These are the times. These are the times – given Orlando, given Bagdad, given Bangladesh, given Turkey this week, given the divides and the fears and anxieties in the world and those in our own lives.² No! This is the time we got to draw the circle in. And we reflected on that Gospel call again to hear and know now that we may be the very people at this very critical time to

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). 1989.

² From the web 8/30/2017:

Orlando: mass shooting 6/12/2016 at Pulse, a gay night club (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Orlando_nightclub_shooting).

Bagdad: coordinated bomb attack, 7/3/2016, in Karrada, a Shia district (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Karrada_bombing);

Bangladesh: ongoing human rights abuses (www.state.gov/documents/organization/265744.pdf);

Turkey: bombings in Istanbul, Cinar (Diyabakur), and Ankara (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_in_Turkey#June.)

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continue to draw the arms of Christ's love and God's love wide to include all of us, stranger and friends, enemy and those we call other.

And this Sunday is the second part of that sermon series of two parts for, yes, we can hear the call to draw the circle wide, but how in the world do we get there? And that is the Word of today. And it's a word called "reconciliation." And we might not often use that word or even quite get what that means, "reconciliation," but sometimes we know what it feels like how does it mean to draw back into relationship those with whom I have a broken relationship? What does it mean to restore the brokenness I feel in me and to take that in and to meet that with love and kindness and care? We come to church for many, many different reasons. One of the reasons that is always drawn me back to church and perhaps you, as well, is that longing for reconciliation and to know how we are met in God's love. So may it be for us today; and will you join me in prayer.

Reconciling One:

In all that divides our hearts,
Divides us from each other in fear and anxiety,
Call us back to Your still place and Your calling word.
Call us forth within and without
To be embodiments of that love that we see in Christ. Amen.

It was the winter of 1990, Hyde Park, Chicago, Illinois. Dave and I had just moved to Chicago. We'd left two churches where we each were serving: Dave, a Presbyterian; I in the United Church of Christ – moved to Chicago so Dave could go to social work school. For both of us we thought this may be it; we'll never ever be back serving as local parish pastors again.

Dave was in school; hated it. I was running a startup AIDS organization and overwhelmed at that very height of the AIDS epidemic. First time we'd ever lived together – in a strange city. In a strange place that then – as it is now and as it was then – was torn by racial violence and violence in the streets. And we were church shopping.

And we found ourselves that winter at a Lutheran church that had a good pastor, a very good pastor and he was good preacher. One of the things that he really did was he talked about the social issues of the day. And they were, oh, so *there* before us in 1990. Saddam Hussein had just declared that he was going to invade ... Kuwait. It was the beginning of operation Desert Shield. (Some of us remember that.) Nelson Mandela had just been released from prison. It was an amazing time! And the preacher preached to all of those conflicted, heartbreaking, breaking-open places in our life and in our world. And he did a great sermon, and he brought us right up to the point to feel that crisis, to take it in, and then he'd end. And he would say, "And so Christ is crucified."

"Christ is crucified!" What the heck?!

There was a really good thing about this church: they had offering envelopes and they were big. And they had little pencils in the pew racks. And so at this point, Dave and I would pull out our pencils and pull out an offering envelope and we would scribble our responses. We would say, "You had us! We were right there. And then you let us off the hook." Christ crucified? What the heck!? Then we signed our names and we put them in offering plates.

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You know, here it is 26 years later. And I am preaching at a similar time, when we know that there is conflict within: within ourselves, within our family, within our neighborhoods, our communities, our world. There is overwhelming conflict in the world and anxiety and fear throughout. And the Scripture word for today to meet us in that brokenness is "Christ crucified."

Christ crucified: What in the world does Christ crucified have to do with the way to reconciliation and drawing the circle wide?

Well you know, back then in 1990 when I heard those words "Christ crucified," I, like many of you, first thought, well, this means "substitutionary atonement." Have any you ever heard of that word? For some of you, that word "atonement theology" has had huge effect on your life, as a huge rumble ripple through Christianity of what Christ was all about. Now I grew up in the United Church of Christ. And we didn't talk about atonement theology, so I didn't understand this. I didn't understand what the pastor said by "Christ crucified." In fact, unfortunately, I grew up in a church when we didn't talk about Christ's crucifixion much at all!

But it was years later that I got to go to Israel and in Israel went to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Any of you ever been there? I have to tell you about this place: it's a bizarre place. It's kind of a maze, a warren of different little chapels built over the very place that tradition says Christ was crucified and Christ was buried. And so our tour guide took us to the place where, "Here, tradition says, was the very cross that Christ died on." And so we stood at this little chapel and below – down here – below the cross there was this glass pane, and you could see through to the stone that was there under the earth. And she said, "Now notice here – and you can see that there's blood if you look closely." It's a little stain there. You might have a hard time seeing it, but there is red blood there.

And then we had to go downstairs to the Chapel and below down there – and again the plate glass wall, the stone – she traced for us, "and here's the blood flowing down. And here on this corner is the skull of Adam. Adam was buried right here! And you can see the blood came down and touched the skull of Adam and by that our sins are forgiven."

Well, it's a beautiful theology! It is a beautiful, fitting-together theology to make sense of the death of Christ: Christ crucified – because of Christ's death we have now been restored. We been reconciled. We been brought home again to God's love through that sacrificial love. It's a great theory. It's a beautiful theory. It's had huge effects on some of our lives, but it doesn't have much to do with what Paul was talking about when Paul talks about Christ crucified. Most scholars agree that the atonement theologies – sacrificial substitutionary atonement – came from Anselm about 900 years ago.

Paul absolutely believed that the crucifixion – Christ crucified – made a difference, made an atoning at-one-ment of his life with God. It made a total difference, but by it he meant something very different. And by it he meant this, "See. See in Jesus, see God. See the way of God. God is this way. It is this kind of loving, forgiving God; it is this God who forgives us, who loves us – while we were yet sinners, while we were yet broken, while we were unrepentant – God loved us. See this kind of love."

And if you're going to love in that kind of way, it's going to have costs. If you're going to love your people in that kind of way, it's going to have costs. So it had for Jesus. So it had for Paul. So it had for Martin Luther King. So it had for Gandhi. So it had for so many others who drew the circle wide and

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said see, see, see this love. For Paul that love that he saw in Jesus, that kind of love changed and transformed his life and was saving ... saving. And so he could call Jesus his Savior.

Now what about us: what difference does all of that talk have to say to how we are to respond to the brokenness that we know in our families, our lives, and there within ourselves. What does it mean for us? Well, *there's* the question of the day, and I don't have any ready answers. But I have some confession about it and about the struggles that I have to step into and take into that love and live it out in my life.

The first question, of course, for all of us as it is for me, is do I want to want to be reconciled? Do I really want to want to be reconciled? Reconciliation has costs. It means putting something down so that there can be a meeting. And do I really want to put down my power? Do I really want to put down my right to be right? ... Mmm ... Not sure. ... Not sure, honestly. ... Is it going to take me a while? Yes. Might it take me a long while? Yes. It might.

A friend of mine, Phyllis, did racial justice work in and throughout Seattle in the 1960s. And during that time she said, "Peter the hardest group of people we worked with were people who looked like you." Like me?! "Yes," Phyllis said. "It was because you read all the books. You knew all the stuff. You came in, and we tried to teach you about this. But you did not want to be changed. You did not want to be transformed. You wanted to keep thinking your way through it with everything that you knew and understood."

And do I want to be changed? Maybe. "Maybe" is my most honest answer – and yet the Gospel continues to call me to more.

And that is why I was so impressed to read Rock Moulton's little write-up in the bulletin this week when we're invited to read Ta-Henisi Coates's book "Between the World and Me"³ at Seabeck this week. And if you haven't read it, read it. But it's Rock's confession that he has in it. And he says, "You know as I read Coates's struggle with and his own assumptions that he held as an African-American man," Rock said, "It made me look at my own assumptions, made me look at my own stuff." I need people like Rock in my life who say, "To get to reconciliation I need to look at my stuff, to be able to put something down of my defensiveness to make some room to hear another story."

You know it's said that we hold feelings for about 90 seconds, but what happens is that we attach meanings, we attach assumptions, we attach conclusions to those feelings. And so they linger on and on and on and on for minutes to become hours to become days to become years to become life times. And I don't know about you, but I have a lot invested in those stories; and it's a lot to put it down. Do I want reconciliation? Yes. Maybe. But it begins first with me during my own work.

And that's why I invite us today to read with me as I read to myself – and for you to read to yourself perhaps today – this poem: this challenge, this call from Filipino poet J. Cabazares⁴ and what he

³ Ta-Henisi Coates, "Between the World and Me." Spiegel & Grau. 2015.

⁴ Justino Cabazares, Jr., First published before 1998. Mr. Cabazares is a board member of Sildap. (LJPC Module on Mindanao Issues, p. 23, paragraph 9.

(<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/51ac48dae4b04c1c5aac799/t/55a5f1dfe4b084ed3d346c4a/1436938719199/Module+on+Mindanao+Issues.pdf>, accessed 8/24/2017)

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writes in this is something I need to hear and often don't want to hear: No, Peter. Don't run quick to reconciliation – unless I'm willing to do my work and put something down.

I invite us to read it to each other to read it to ourselves.

Talk to us about reconciliation

Only if you first experience
the anger of our dying.

Talk to us of reconciliation

Only if your living is not the cause
of our dying.

Talk to us about reconciliation

Only if your words are not products of your devious scheme
to silence our struggle for freedom.

Talk to us about reconciliation

Only if your intention is not to entrench yourself
more on your throne.

Talk to us about reconciliation

Only if you cease to appropriate all the symbols
and meanings of our struggle.

And I wonder on this.

Elie Wiesel's⁵ death yesterday made me remember another Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom, Dutch writer. She wrote, something that I read as a teenager high school in her little book, "The Hiding Place" (1971).⁶ Maybe some of you have read that book. There's part of that book that, you know, here I am, 40 some years later, and I still struggle on. I still struggle in display of reconciliation.

Corrie spent the Nazi Holocaust in a concentration camp. Her sister Betsie died in the camp. And she spent her life, her ministry after then speaking about forgiveness. She talked about how we have to forgive our enemies. And after one of her talks, a man came up to her and she recognized him as the SS officer at the [time] she was in a concentration camp. And he held out his hands to her and he said, "What a fine message Fraulein. Now I know that we are reconciled because Christ has died for us as you assure us." And Corrie ten Boom says, "I stood there. I, who had spent all of this time talking to all of these people about forgiveness and reconciliation, and I could not raise my hand."

[And I want to say to Corrie, good for you! Make him do his work. Call him out.]

And she said, "And I prayed."

She said, "God, I pray you help me to forgive this man because I cannot forgive him." She said, "I stood there and I just saw all the pictures of those mocking men. I remembered Betsie's death. I

⁵ Died 7/2/2016, age 87. (<http://www.legacy.com/memorial-sites/holocaust-survivors/obituary.aspx?n=Elie-Wiesel&pid=180534914&ua=uFBI8zuEvClXoA%2fzehZI2A%3d%3d>. Accessed 8/24/2017.

⁶ Corrie ten Boom, Elizabeth Sherrill, John Sherrill (1971). The Hiding Place. Guideposts Associates. ISBN 0-912376-01-5. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hiding_Place_\(biography\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hiding_Place_(biography))); accessed 8/24/2017)

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remembered that time. I couldn't get the pictures out of my mind. And this hand out there and before me."

She said, "Christ forgive me because I cannot forgive him."

And finally she said, "Christ I am unable to forgive him, but may your forgiveness work through me." And she said as they joined hands together she said something miraculous happened. She said, "I could feel all this energy going out of my shoulder and through my arm and out through my hand and into him. And I felt this overwhelming love in my heart for this man."

Help me to know.

Help me to understand such love.

The only sense that Corrie Ten Boom could make of that is when Christ gives us the command to love he also gives us the power to do so. And it makes me wonder where in my own life have I sat on that power, pushed away that power, said that power cannot be because I'm not willing to let that loving power of Christ work in me? It sets me to work and to look at all of the people in my life who I still have not forgiven and who I still am not reconciled with. And though I would never say to anybody else, "You have to forgive," what I know out of my own testimony in my own life is this: It's when we do not and when we cling – when we cling to the hurt – it acts in us like poison and it can poison our lives. And here is this power before us, this love before us. And I just wonder again how *do* I hold that back and how do I not take that in.

The pastor of the Lutheran Church called us up. It's about three or four weeks later after getting all of our offering envelopes with our long comments, and he said, "I've gotten some notes from you and I'd like to come for a visit."

Twenty-six years later and as a pastor myself, I go, "What an amazing thing." He didn't just write us off as two angry twenty-something-year-olds in his pews. He didn't say, "Gosh, I've just got too much to do." He didn't say, "Gosh, I wish these guys would stop writing on my offering envelopes." And he didn't say, "This is not the best way to communicate with me." But he didn't do *nothing*. He did the work of reconciliation and he picked up the phone and said, "I'd like to come see you."

And, you know, all these years later, I don't remember a thing about what he said. But what I remembered in the weeks past while remembering that visit is that he speaks to me, still. He speaks to me still because he brought Christ to me. And it broke open in me all of the brokenness, all of the longing, all of the lostness in my life. Let me lay a little bit of that on the table and say, yeah, I just come here looking for a little meaning, and a way through, and I'm trying to find my way. Oh, what a gift!

Perhaps the power is true. Perhaps the call is ours. I wonder how you and I might live it out in our lives today, to hear again "Christ crucified." Oh, such love is this that knows no bounds. That love is for you, for me, for all. Let's take it in and, oh, let's follow that way and live it out. Let's draw the circle wide. – Amen

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