

03/23/14 -- Lent 3A

“*Reconciling God of Faith, Hope and Love*” © -- Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

This is the 3rd Sunday of Lent, the church season of repentance, reflection, prayer and confession. Last week, we talked about Justification - how we get right with God. This week we will deepen what it means to get right with God by discussing Reconciliation.

Romans 5:11 says, “...*but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received this reconciliation.*” Paul has spent a lot of time talking about Justification, which is about what is required to set a relationship right. Reconciliation is all about the work involved in recovering and restoring a relationship to a loving place. We are called to be “*ambassadors of Christ because we have the ministry of reconciliation*” in 2 Corinthians 5. In other words, our work as followers of Christ is to be those who reconcile relationships - among one another and with God.

One of the most compelling stories of reconciliation in Scripture is in Genesis 33. This is the story of Esau and Jacob meeting again after years and years of separation. If you remember, Esau has been tricked out of his inheritance by Jacob when they were just kids, all for a bowl of soup. And then later, Jacob, with the help of his mother, tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing of the father, which meant that Jacob became the primary overseer of Isaac’s property and possessions. Just so we are clear, this is the continuance of Abraham’s inheritance, which was vast and huge. By tricking Isaac, Jacob becomes a very, very wealthy man. By contract, Esau is left with comparatively little.

So, in Genesis 33, Jacob is crossing the river into his brother’s territory. They have not seen one another since the trickery of their youth, which cost Esau so much. Esau presumes his brother has **come to wage war** rather than kindle friendship. Jacob presumes his brother is rightfully filled with anger and revenge. This is why Jacob separates his family and property in this part of the story. They are wary of one another. They are fulfilling the Russian saying, *Trust, but verify.*

But then, a remarkable thing happens. Esau sees his brother, drops everything and runs into his arms. Think of all the internal work Esau has had to do in order to greet his brother with love rather than attack. And then Jacob, even though he has divided his property to protect it, now gives that property to Esau. All of this leads up to some of the most healing words spoken in a relationship in Scripture; Jacob says to his brother, Esau, “*Now that I have seen your face and you have accepted me, it is as if I have seen the face of God*” (Gen 33:11). These are the words of reconciliation. They are the words of a healed relationship.

Relationships, whether with individuals, with a group of people like your church, or with God, are really hard work. Relationships are fragile and need tenderness and care, along with commitment and firm convictions. When things are rocky and difficult in a relationship, we easily forget what was good about the relationship. And even if there was very little good about the relationship, we can stand very far from a sense of forgiveness and the need for healing. Sometimes, we would rather just argue. We would rather be right, rather than in relationship with someone. Or, as my friend Ray put it the other day, “*We would rather be right than righteous.*”

Relationships in struggle are very painful. If we have any sense of God, we wonder where God is in the relationship. When the going gets rough, we doubt the presence of God. We become like the thirsty Israelites in the desert and say to one another and to our spiritual leaders, “*Is the Lord among us, or not?*” (Ex 17:7).

When we ask this, we are really acknowledging that we are no longer aware that we have been reconciled to God. This is why Moses names the place the Israelites said this, *Massah and Meribah*. Massah and Meribah mean *quarrelling and testing*. When we are quarrelling with one another and with God, testing one another to see where we stand in the pecking order or if God is still listening, we have forgotten what God has done for us already.

But Massah and Meribah is also the place where God caused water to flow from a rock when Moses struck it with his staff. From the rocks of quarrel and conflict and testing, the living waters of God flowed forth. This is true reconciliation. So we ask, over and over, like the Israelites, *Is the Lord among us or not?* We know God is among us when reconciliation is happening; when families are reunited after great conflict, when friendships are restored, when communities recommit to one another after betrayal and loss, when individuals lay to rest some great regret or sin from the past, when we know our relationship with God has been restored.

Reconciliation is the purpose of the living waters of Jesus Christ, and really, behind every reconciliation is the movement of God acting through the Holy Spirit, since the healing of relationships is the work of God. And it is our work as well.

This doesn't mean it isn't difficult, however. Broken relationships create suffering for all involved. Some relationships never recover from their brokenness, and we live with the regret, the anger, the betrayal and the sorrow of them. But suffering is also the beginning of hope. As Paul tells us today, *"...we also rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us"* (Rom 5:3-5).

Since our hope is solely in Jesus Christ, we know that hope is the living water from which we taste God, from which we are reminded of our reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well, *"If you have known the gift of God, and who it is who said to you 'Give me some water to drink', you would have asked him and he would have given you living water to drink"* (Jn 4:10).

This scene at the well is packed with theological insight and meaning. It is worthy of a book, just in this little story. Today, though, I want us to see this as a story of relationships healed and reconciliation. The Samaritan woman in this story is in a difficult place in her life. She is coming to the well at noon, in the heat of the day. Wells in the ancient world were gathering spots for the women of the village. They would go in the early morning or toward the end of the day because of the heat of the desert. The Samaritan woman, however, comes to the well alone and when it is very hot. This tells us she has been excluded from her community in some way.

Perhaps it is because the Samaritan woman has a string of broken relationships behind her. She is on her sixth relationship, with five husbands before this relationship. Living together in the ancient world was considered disordered and unsanctified. It was considered a reason to be shunned by the community.

So this Samaritan woman at the well is visited by the source of the living and healing waters of reconciliation. She undoubtedly is suffering. She has endured much. It is likely her relationships have been and probably still are abusive. She comes to the well as a broken, disaffected, abandoned individual. Perhaps some of you can relate to her.

Through her suffering, this woman has endured and been patient in her suffering. She clearly has character, given how she talks with and to Jesus. She doesn't have much concern anymore about what Jesus thinks of her and her opinions, so she says whatever she is thinking. Jesus as always takes what she says and

returns it to her in such a way that she is *“transformed by the renewing of her mind”* (Rom 12:2), which is really just another way of saying we should continually drink from the living waters of Christ continually.

Her discussion with Jesus, though, leads to the beginnings of reconciliation. Like Nicodemus, her transformation is gradual, but eventually she is reconciled to God through Jesus Christ because she wants what Jesus is offering. *“Sir, give me this water so that I will not be thirsty and will not have to come here to draw water”* (Jn 4:15), she says to Jesus. She believes in the Messiah. She says, *“I know the Messiah (the one called Christ) is coming; whenever he comes he will tell us everything”* (4:26). Isn't this exactly what Jesus did with the Samaritan woman? He told her everything about her.

The Samaritan woman is also reconciled to the town she is a part of. This comes about not because of anything she does, but because of what Jesus has done with her. The woman returns to the town as an evangelist for the Messiah. *Then the woman left her water jar and went off into the town and said to the people, “Come, see, a man who told me everything I ever did. Surely, he can't be the Messiah, can he?”* (4:29). This is all it takes for the town to go out to see Jesus. She brings an entire village to Christ.

And the town is reconciled to God. *They said to the woman, “We no longer believe because of your words, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know this one really is the Savior of the world* (4:29). So we have a lonely woman in difficult, unresolved relationships reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, a woman reconciled to her town through her evangelism and a village reconciled to God because of the testimony of an excluded, broken, shunned woman. It is as if the woman and the village, in the shadow of Christ, who is the Messiah, were saying to one another, *Now that I have seen your face and you have accepted me, it is as if I have seen the face of God*. All the quarrelling and testing, all the wondering within ourselves and with one another, *Is the Lord among us or not*, is reconciled in the presence of Jesus. All the suffering we have endured with patience, and the strength of character we have developed from that suffering and waiting, has been resolved in the fulfillment of the hope we have in Jesus Christ, who has reconciled *us*, like he did with the Samaritan woman, to God.

To finish today, bring to mind someone with whom you feel you need to be reconciled with. It could be a big conflict or a small one. A close friend or relative. Remember Esau and Jacob. Remember the woman at the well. Remember that the Lord has already reconciled you to himself through your walk with Jesus Christ. Remember that whenever we wonder if the Lord is among us or not, we know for sure the Lord is around when reconciliation is taking place. Now bring that relationship to mind and call to mind the reconciliations that the Lord has already done with and for you in your life. And imagine that person you are in conflict with before you. Imagine saying to them: *Now that I have seen your face and you have accepted me, it is as if I have seen the face of God*. Let's say it together, out loud.

It is indeed as if I have seen the face of God today. Amen.