

Reconciliation and the Untold Story of the Prodigal's Brother
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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It all began with bananas.

At the close of the 1800s, enterprising New England businessmen discovered that Americans had a taste for the sweet fruit. They descended on Central America, where the climate for growing bananas was perfect. They gathered control of all the land they could ... and began shipping bananas home by the tons. Fortunes began to be made.

One of the largest banana-producing nations at the time was Guatemala. At first, its leaders saw the opportunity to improve the lives of its citizens, so they brokered deals with the banana exporters, granting long-term leases to railroads and land. In return, the American fruit growers provided adequate housing and medical facilities for their Guatemalan workers, as well as rudimentary schools for the children. Workers for the multi-national banana companies enjoyed somewhat better conditions than most farm laborers in Guatemala, even if it was a paternalistic relationship.

Things went well, very well, for the dominant U.S. company, the United Fruit Company. It more than doubled its financial assets in less than a decade and returned 62 cents on the dollar to investors back home. An employee of the company later wrote that Guatemala was the perfect location for such a profitable venture, because it had the "region's weakest, most corrupt and most pliable government."¹ It was such a highly profitable venture because, as United Fruit's PR man admitted, the company was "conducted like a private government."²

But then something unexpected happened. Guatemala elected a president with real democratic ideals and the troubling notion that his people should get a fair shake in the banana business. He pushed for just labor conditions at the docks, export duties on the bananas, compensation for exhaustion of the land and other land use reforms. He also announced plans for the nation to build new railroads and highways so its transportation routes would not be captive of the banana companies.

All of this, of course, shook up the American banana growers, which sensed they might lose control of a good thing. To make a long and complicated story a bit shorter, what happened next was an ugly chapter for American politics and capitalism. According to

¹ Bitter Fruit, Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, p. 73

² Ibid, p 75

one history of Guatemala, published by the David Rockefeller Center on Latin American Studies at Harvard University, the powerful U.S. Fruit Company began a PR and political campaign to undermine the progressive Guatemalan president.

All of a sudden, hints at a communist threat in the region began to surface. Leading U.S. senators and congressmen argued publicly that business interests be kept safe. The CIA and White House got involved and, after that, the ruling low-budget progressive administration in Guatemala didn't really stand a chance.

After a brief military strike and a coup – both of which were officially credited to rebels in the region but were carried out with U.S. military hardware- the progressive president was out and the way was cleared for United Fruit and others to continue business unfettered. After the U.S. installed it's own chosen leaders, sparking a decades-long civil war took hold, leaving the country still crippled.

Why in the world am I giving you this history lesson?

First, because a group from this church will travel to Guatemala in three weeks. We will spend time with the people there, in cities and in rural mountain villages. We'll work with them on projects to improve their humble lives. It's important for us to know what's happened between our nation and theirs and to what degree it still shapes their day to day reality.

More broadly, like it or not, stories like this one remind us that, as the world's most powerful and influential nation, we bear a particular responsibility to hold our ideals of capitalism and democracy in proper balance ... and in check. Surely our faith can help us find that balance.

Stories like this one remind us that we have at times failed to achieve that balance and foreign lands have suffered. Let us pray that our faith can redirect us in the future.

Stories like this one remind us that even now our nation is entangled in more current versions of the same story around the world, in places where our national financial and economic interests and our democratic ideals are tied in a knots that can inhibit our view of what is right and just for the native people of those places.

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Recently I read a blurb from a new book about the presidency of Bill Clinton. It seems that the president met with Pope John Paul II in 1999 and received a papal scolding for

the U.S.'s embargo against Cuba. The pope called it spiritual violence. He reminded Clinton that the U.S. stood alone in its global supremacy after the fall of the Soviet Union.

"You have been a twin all this time," the pope said. "Now you must learn to live as an orphan."

The Pope's point was clear, writes the author of the book. The U.S. "needed prayerful wisdom in order to set an example for the rest of the world."³

Reconciliation. That was the pope's message that day and it's a prescription for so much of what ails the human condition. As with justification and sanctification, reconciliation is one of those big church-y words. It sounds more complicated than its meaning. Webster's offers several definitions that help. Reconciliation is:

- 1) To restore to friendship or harmony
- 2) To make consistent or congruous (or, we might say, to bring into balance) or,
- 3) To accept

Our lives are full of the need for reconciliation. It may be the need to get right with someone else, to fix a broken or abandoned relationship. Maybe a parent or a sibling. Maybe a friend or co-worker. Or maybe we've been disappointed or let down by the last person we would have ever expected.

Or it may be that we need to come to grips with a reality or truth that defines our existence but we've been slow to accept. Maybe a job lost, an illness or disease that has changed the way we live. Or maybe a truth about ourselves that we know blocks our path to a more peaceful mind and soul or obstructs our relationship with God.

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As an account of the human condition, the Bible stands with the best of them. It's full of stories involving the need for reconciliation.

One of the best is the tale of Esau and Jacob. You remember that one. With his mother's encouragement, Jacob steals the father's blessing, which was rightfully Esau's, as the older brother. It was a dastardly thing by any measure. Years later, Jacob and Esau meet again. Knowing what's coming, Jacob throws himself on the ground in submission and apology but Esau has already forgiven him and greets him with a brotherly kiss.

³ The Clinton Tapes, by Taylor Branch, as excerpted in *Christian Century*, Oct. 20, 2009

There is one other story about brothers that came to mind for me, especially after reading what the pope said to President Clinton about how the U.S. needs to learn to live in the world.

The story of the Prodigal Son is one of the most well-known in all of scripture. One of two sons asks for his share of the inheritance due from their father. He takes it, squanders it in rich and foolish living until he is left with nothing. Deciding he has no alternative, he returns home, hoping his father will take him on as a servant. Throughout all of this, the other son sticks to his duty. He stays with his father, works day in and day out, as if he were a servant himself. He never asks for much. Never gets any special treatment.

Then one day the wild child, the rebel son, comes crawling home and the father throws him a party. Naturally, the dutiful son gets angry when he hears the music and sees the dancing. He can't make sense of what his father is doing. He can't find the same kind of acceptance for his brother as Esau had for Jacob.

"We *have* to celebrate," the father of the prodigal explains. "Your brother was lost and now he is found. He was dead and now he has come back to life."

That's where the story ends – because it is a story that is more about mercy and unconditional love than anything else, the kind of mercy and love we have from God in and through Christ.

As for the dutiful older brother, we don't really know how or whether he ever did reconcile himself to his brother or vice versa. Nor does the story tell us whether he came to accept what his father did. But, based on what we know, it's easy to imagine that it took a while, if he ever could come to forgive his bratty kid brother. That's the way it is with reconciliation. It often calls for forgiveness, and we all know how hard that can be.

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Still, the Gospel calls us to forgive and to reconcile with those who've done us wrong or those whom we have done wrong. As important, the gospel calls us to ensure the church, the body of Christ, is an agent of reconciliation.

We Presbyterians will be asked to think about the business of reconciliation in the coming year or so. Part of our denomination's constitution is our Book of Confessions

and it's been proposed that we add a new confession to that book, one that focuses sharply on reconciliation and repentance.

In September, a study committee recommended that we add the Belhar Confession, of 1982. As with all confessions, the Belhar Confession was written to confront a specific issue or sin at a specific moment in history, in this case the policy of apartheid that separated white South Africans from black. The official policy of "apartheid" would later be deemed an international crime but it was the norm for decades in South Africa.

When the white church in South Africa claimed theological justification for the law as part of God's will, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church had had enough. It declared apartheid a sin, producing the Belhar Confession as its outcry. Twelve years later, apartheid was dismantled.

Now we Presbyterians will be asked to consider the Belhar Confession for its more timeless wisdom. Next summer, at our national General Assembly meeting representatives will determine whether we should vote to adopt the Belhar Confession. If Presbyteries are given the vote and if a majority say yes, Belhar would be added to our Book of Confessions.

Throughout 2009, we at Caldwell have considered the issue of justice from its many angles – how the scriptures deal with justice, what the church has done for justice through the centuries and what justice looks like today in Charlotte politics, business and public education. So, I take it as great good news that we as a denomination may have the chance to study a more contemporary creed both for its currency and its timelessness.

At the heart of the Belhar Confession is the reconciling work of God in and through Christ and how that work draws us together as people and as the church. As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, God reconciled us to himself in Christ, closing the gap of our sinfulness that we could never close. In Christ, everything old has passed away and everything is new.

Paul tells the church, and Belhar celebrates, that Christ gives the ministry of reconciliation to the church. In these days when there is fresh talk about division and even schism in the denomination, the words of the Belhar Confession call us to be a model of unity to the world.

But Belhar has more to say, reminding us that reconciliation often requires the establishment of justice ... of balance ... and calling us to state that "We believe:

- “that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
- that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged
- that God calls the church to follow him in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;

As for God’s church, Belhar calls us to confess:

- “that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;
- that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.”

All of a sudden, Christ’s gift to us the church, this gift of the message and ministry of reconciliation, may start to feel heavy and burdensome. It digs in between our shoulder blades and grates against the back of our neck.

We have our hands full, we might want to say, with reconciling our personal relationships and with our acts of charity and mission. Perhaps we can leave this justice business to the church down the street.

But friends, the gospel that foretells of a new creation ... the gospel that includes stories of mercy and forgiveness for we, the prodigal people ... is the same gospel that says we, the church, are “entrusted, (entrusted, no less!) with the message of reconciliation. We are called to be ambassadors for Christ, who is the one that reconciled us to God.

Such a gospel doesn’t always fit the neat, orderly, rational world of people like the prodigal’s brother, as much as we need their likes in the world. Such a gospel is rooted in grace we can neither explain nor earn.

In our personal relationships, especially the broken ones ... in the parts of our lives that are difficult to accept ... in our denomination, struggling for its unity ... maybe even in how we as a nation treat other nations ... perhaps a new way to confess our need for reconciliation is just what the doctor ordered.

Amen.