

Reconciling Faith, Part One
August 26, 2012
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn
Text: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Last week I mentioned that I'd had the privilege of attending a conference of church leaders focused on the future of our denomination. One of the featured congregations at that conference looked a lot like this one.

It's a relatively small congregation, now called simply the Durham Church. It's a combination of two older congregations. But now its ministry is guided by younger members and leaders, with new energy and perspectives. Its goal is to build a congregation that reflects the racial, social and economic diversity of its city.

At the heart of the Durham church's sense of identity is the call to reconciliation. In fact, it defines its worship services as acts of reconciliation. That's a powerful idea. It reminds us of a core theological truth: how central reconciliation is – or should be - to our worship and our service in the name of our Lord.

In worship, we are reconciled to our Creator in our confession of our sins and in hearing the assurance of God's pardon of those sins. We are reconciled with each other, albeit quickly, in our exchange of the peace, sharing the good news of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ. We are ourselves reconciled to God's in our prayers and our praise and in hearing God's word in scripture and preaching. We are united with God in the sacraments of communion and baptism. We then are sent out into the world to be agents of reconciliation after the model of Christ. All of this underscores just how vital our relationship building and mending is to our lives, with each other and with God.

Here at Caldwell, we are blessed by the added power that, as with the Durham Church, we dwell in a diverse community of believers. In each other's company, we are reminded of who we are in the world and of how God speaks to us through the voices, faces and experiences of those whose lives are different from ours.

This idea of worship as reconciliation describes what happens here on Sunday mornings and in ministry throughout the week. But it's one that deserves even more of our intention and attention going forward.

Another part of last week's sermon was some recent public opinion data that was sobering to say the least. Recent polls show that the "nones" are the fastest growing

segment in religion in America today, as in those who, when asked their religious affiliation, marked the box “none.” This seemed to go hand in hand with a different poll that found that confidence in organized religion in America is at an all time low.

For me at least, this raises some directly related questions: First, how do these widely held opinions inform the future of our denomination, which seeks its own renewal? And, second, how might Caldwell be a light to our denomination and our city as we seek, in all humility, to respond to what God is doing here?

I must admit these are not purely academic questions. I’ve been asked to serve as moderator, or chairman, of the committee that guides and coordinates our Presbytery’s work. We are about 125 churches strong across seven counties. These churches span the range of variety, urban and rural, black and white and a little Latino and Asian, large and small, growing and dying, some discontent, some indifferent and some still deeply engaged in ecclesiastical affairs.

So I ask for your prayers. I need your prayers, as does our Presbytery. Because of a drop in church giving to Presbytery, its budget has been cut in half over the last decade and staff has shrunk from 10 people to two and a half.

Despite all of that I happen to believe we are now in a good place. We have been through much of the pain. Now it is time to revive our sense of ourselves and to reclaim our identity – individually and together as sister churches seeking to be the hands and feet of Christ.

As I said last week, we are, after all, “kin” and we can find positive ways to act like it. So, again, I ask for your prayers. I need your prayers and my door and my ears are always open if you have advice, insights or want to get involved.

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As a first step, reconciliation has its appeal and power.

The Bible, God’s story of stories, is full of tales of reconciliation. Adam and Eve and God after the Garden of Eden affair. The fallout and peace-making between brothers Jacob and Esau. The parable of the prodigal son and on and on. In these, scripture shows us that alienation and our need for reconciliation are part of who are as broken – and redeemed – human beings.

This morning’s reading from the Old Testament book of Joshua tells us yet another story of reconciliation. After leading the tribes of Israel in the conquest of a new land,

the great Joshua gathers the tribes one last time. He's going to make sure they know who they are and whose they are. He reminds Israel how Yahweh led them out of bondage and delivered them safely into a new land of their own.

This is part of a carefully constructed narrative, some might even call it poetry, that came to be far more than just a record of events. These frame a ritual of remembrance that defined how Israel expressed its sense of identity as God's chosen nation.

For a parallel with our experience, we might think of great speeches from America's history: "Four score and seven years ago . . .," "We have nothing to fear but fear itself . . .," "Ask not what your country can do for you . . ." and so on.

Joshua says, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." The people of Israel respond with, "Therefore we also will serve the Lord, our God."

Important words and ideas lie behind these statements. The Israelites knew they had forgotten their God, more than a few times. In moments of doubt and disloyalty, they had turned to idols and pagan gods. They knew they were moving into a land where the locals would tempt them with still other gods and false religions.

As it is with us, there are always false gods and idols around the next corner or through the next pass. Then, as now, God asks:

"Do you remember that I am the one who has delivered you thus far? Through thick and thin. Through trial and tribulation. Through the wilderness and the desert. Through hopelessness as well as through victory and joy? I am the Lord your God. Don't forget it."

For Israel, there is almost a preemptive aspect to the ritual that Joshua put in place with this summit meeting of the tribes that became a ritual ceremony of rehearsing history. It's as if Joshua knew the people would, at some point, forget their God. So, Joshua is training them, as imperfect and forgetful people, in the act of reconciliation, an act of repledging their loyalty and allegiance to the God that always gives them pardon.

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Reconciliation must be as central to our ministry today. Wherever we are on our journey and in our relationships with each other . . . families, friendships, people of faith, Christians, Presbyterians.

Caldwell's story is one of a reconciling faith that reaches those who hear it in ways that are ever new and ever powerful. So many of you did not give up on faith, even if the church had given up on you. So many of you kept seeking Christ when you'd been disappointed or rejected by those who called themselves Christians. So many of you kept your minds open when, in too many places, you encountered minds, hearts and doors that were shut tight. So many of you kept God close even when you felt pushed out into the wilderness. Then, so many of you helped keep the focus here outward when, in too many places, the church is turned inward.

For these reasons and others, I keep coming back to the idea that God seems to have called Caldwell in particular into a ministry of reconciliation. Indeed, that is the bottom line to what happens on this campus every day, from our walk with Latino families to our work with homeless women ... from the space we share with the Bread of Life Congregation to concern wherever and whenever we encounter injustice in our city and the world. (Just this morning at breakfast, a Caldwell House neighbor said she felt safe for the first time in years and liberated to focus on how to improve her life,)

True reconciliation doesn't happen automatically, you see. It requires us to put ourselves in the midst of others who are different and in need, just as we are in need. True reconciliation requires that we make ourselves vulnerable and open to how the Holy Spirit may move in our midst.

It requires truth-telling that gets beyond a weekly hug or friendly handshake. It must have gracious listening and forgiveness. Then and only then, we can be blessed with reconciliation with those who hold views and perspective that are different than our own, including Christians and Presbyterians of all stripes and then, all religions.

In theological terms, true reconciliation means we must die to our old selves. We must finally reject those cherished old friends, whose names are hurt, suspicion and resentment. We must let go of our disillusion and step out of our cynicism and sarcasm. We must confess our narrow mindedness and foregone conclusions about those with whom we disagree. And we must be the ones to initiate the peacemaking.

The good news, sisters and brothers, is that we are equipped and enabled to do that, in Christ. And that provides more than enough hope for us Christians, despite all of our disagreements, even including the Presbyterian Church USA.

Just as Joshua called on the children of Israel to, once and for all, leave behind their false gods, this morning's story from Joshua calls all of us, as God's people, to leave behind our own "little-g" gods, idols and false religions (money and success, fear and

anxiety, bias and hatred, addiction to technology), however comforting they may be, however safe from change in the world they may make us feel.

As with the people of Israel, God summons us to move forward in courage into the freedom that is ours already in Christ. In that spirit, I close with these thoughts from the theologian Karl Barth. Listen for how they speak to Israel's situation in the book of Joshua and ours today.

In starting out anew, the church has made a choice. It has forbidden in advance any homesickness for what it is leaving behind. It welcomes and already loves what lies before it. It is still here, but no longer here; not there yet, but already there. It has a long journey before it, as well as battles, suffering hunger and thirst. There is no denying that it is sighing, but more undeniably, it is rejoicing. And it thinks, speaks and acts accordingly. The new start of the church consists in this crisis of the still captive, already liberated people of God.

Thanks be to God, Amen.