

10 January 2020
Galatians 2:15-21; Luke
15:1-3, 11-32
Reconciliation with God
First Mennonite Church

This morning our subject is being reconciled to God. My first question is what kind of God are we asked to be reconciled with? What's your image of God?

When I was a child, one of my most

dominant images of God was of an all-powerful, all knowing king, sitting up in heaven on a throne wearing a big golden crown. This king was also a judge—and judges were always stern, serious, and carried a big stick. And if you broke the rules, God would find you and make use of that big stick. As a result of this dominant image of God, I lived in fear: fear that God was forever looking down from his heavenly throne at me, fear that God was always watching to see if I screwed up, and keeping track of the times I did, fear of never being good enough.

You may recall that last summer, we explored different metaphors for God. As finite imperfect humans, we can only speak of God's presence and action within this world by using metaphors, terms or images borrowed from human experience to express something lying outside of direct human experience. We explored the biblical metaphors of God as a knitter, as a woman searching for a lost coin, as a Potter just to name a few.

One of the main points I tried to make in that series was that the Bible describes God in many different ways, and so we can and should talk about God, think about God in ways that move beyond our childhood images of stern old kings with big sticks.



The metaphor I'd like you to have in your minds this morning is of God as a heart-broken father sitting on the porch waiting for his wayward son to return home, because that's the image that Jesus has in his mind when he tells this story to the Pharisees and scribes. That's the image Jesus uses in a world that was full of stern old kings carrying sticks.

Let me paraphrase Paul in Galatians 2. We all know that a person does not win their justification with God by being good and perfect, but by trusting in what Jesus taught. God loves us not because we're so good at keeping the rules; keeping the rules is not what God is all about. God wants us to accept the reality that we are loved deeply—and wants us to be free to live with hope and peace and joy so that those around us might also live with peace and hope and joy.

A few words about reconciliation. In ordinary Greek usage of Paul's time, reconciliation was not a "religious" term. Religious people back in Bible days didn't use the word reconciliation when seeking to appease God by offering sacrifices, to cleanse their feelings of guilt, or receiving divine pardon for sins. Rather, it is a word drawn from the sphere of **politics**; it refers to dispute resolution. So one could speak of the diplomatic reconciliation of warring nations or, in the sphere of personal relationships—like the reconciliation of an estranged husband and wife. This is how Paul uses the word in 1 Corinthians 7:11.

So, when Paul uses the verb "reconcile" with God, he is declaring that God has launched a dramatic new diplomatic initiative to overcome human alienation and to establish new and peaceful relationships. This is clear in Romans 5: "*While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son*" (Romans 5.10). In the Bible God has launched a diplomatic initiative to overcome human alienation and to establish new and peaceful relationships between us and God, with one another, and between us and the rest of creation.

I'm going to suggest this morning that being reconciled to God is not our job. Scripture tells us that God has already reconciled us unto God's own self. Again, Paul: *all this comes from God who has settled the relationship between us and God and has now called us to settle the relationships with each other* (2 Corinthians 5:18). Our task is to stop fighting among ourselves and accept that which God so desperately wants for us and for everyone who shares the world with us.

Belief in this reconciling God that Jesus talks about is, in my judgment, a faith statement. 1 John 4 says,

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us (1 John 4:12).

Now that suggests to me that all language about God is faith language—a commitment to live with the awareness that the factual data about God is way beyond my pay scale. It's inevitable that when God reaches out to us trying to make God's own self-known, that there's a good chance that each of us will have differing views about how we think and talk about God. This is why the Bible uses so many different metaphors for God. But just because one writer describes God as a shepherd, doesn't invalidate the writer who describes God as a Potter. In other words, it's not one or the other, but both/and.

Could it be that the creativity of this reconciling loving God is so big, so wide, so deep, so vast that God can perhaps handle two or three or maybe two or three thousand different ways for us to identify, describe, and experience God?

What I'm suggesting here is that it's our human frailty and human limits are incapable of mastering the total, full, exhaustive concept of this divine entity that we call God. God really is bigger than we think!

Because of my theological education and my experiences living abroad and in different cultures and religious traditions, I'm no longer comfortable with the angry and violent God that I learned about as a child. Maybe I've become a bit less theological and a bit more human and practical. You see, the easiest way for me to imagine God is not through big abstract philosophical concepts like God as Omnipotent or God as unmoved mover, but through the person of Jesus. It is through Jesus—his life, teachings and ministry—that God becomes known to us.

And maybe if we could become human again and think about this God who loves and cares for us so deeply, we might be able to discover where God dwells in the midst of us. If we could look for expressions of love in the people and the events of the day in which we live, it might help us, because Jesus said, that's where God dwells (2 Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 21:3)

Being reconciled to God does not require that you first have a doctrinally full and complete understanding or definition of God. We can all follow God even though we are frail and imperfect human beings; can all follow God even though we lack

the ability to speak eloquently and accurately about God. So, how can we be reconciled to God and experience that reconciling love that God would endeavor each of us to have?

Here are three exceedingly simple suggestions:

1. Let's intentionally look for expressions of beauty all around us, because the Psalmist tells us that it's in that beauty of nature that God is experienced. The earth's beauty is the handiwork of God too.
2. Let's consciously start our day with a very simple prayer: Lord walk with me today that I might see you in the face of another person, and empower me be sensitive to those who are walking alongside me.
3. Let's pray that we might be a community of faith that dares to listen to each other, and who willingly listens to the stranger among us. Why? Well, the next time we see them, they're no longer strangers, because we've listened to the other.

Dare we say, that God is better experienced within us as a community, than within me as a lone individual? God dwells in the midst of us in all of us as we share together, as we discern together, do things together, eat together (alas, we can't do this during a virial pandemic), pray together, and simply being who we are together.

Perhaps a crucial question would be how does God's Holy Spirit give life to the reconciliation that we have been given in Jesus Christ our Lord? I see evidence of that reconciliation in quite a number of things among us:

For example, when we volunteer with organisations who feed the poor or help those on the margins of society; in the jail or prison as we help persons prepare to live a new life upon release; with Habitat for Humanity as we share resources to help someone to have a home of their own; and, with our own small efforts like FIM which helps interested seniors remain physically active as well as provide a space for those who may be lonely to have healthy human connection. All these are good and they give witness to the reconciliation that we have.

But there are times when we all need someone who will listen to us without judging, someone who will hold our hand and walk with us in those days when we feel completely overwhelmed and our own strength and patience runs out and we don't quite know what to do or where to turn. Can we learn together ways of

experiencing the presence of God's reconciling, healing love with each other in these times too?

Furthermore, can we also learn how we can ask for help from others without feeling that we are weak, poor, insufficient, or even bad? Can we accept the presence of God in each other and draw on that presence to find strength when we struggle and fail? You see, on those days—and there are those days for all of us—when God seems just a bit far away, aloof and detached. Your presence can bring healing and hope to others as they can live off your strength when theirs is just not very good for the day.

You see, we don't have to be absolutely sure about how we define God in order to experience God's love, because it's here in the midst of this community. It's been my experience that it's in the process of being involved with others that I learned the most about God.

When we look at the prodigal son story, I'm curious where we find ourselves in the story? Most of the time, we like to think that we are the loving father sitting there hoping that our son will come home. As I reflected on this story in light of the violent events in Washington this past week, I wondered whether a significant portion of the Church is more like the prodigal son than the loving father.



You see, the majority of US President Trump's supporters are evangelical Christians. For years they supported him, gave excuses for his racist and misogynistic behaviour, turned a blind eye to his incessant lies, wrapped themselves in the flag of God and country, and blindly worshipped and followed him, even when he incited them to violence

at the US Capitol building. Yes, Christians were there, wanting to do their part to "make America Godly Again." There are many Christian leaders who are complicit in what took place there.

This worldly movement has even spilled over in to US Anabaptist communities, according to *Glen Guyton, the Executive Director of Mennonite Church USA*. In a blog post the day after the riots in Washington, Guyton wrote, “The reality is the polarization and division around political ideologies cuts through MC USA congregations and conferences as well. We have, indeed, done violence to one another by using partisan political positions as a litmus test for Christian faithfulness.”¹ I suspect these influences are even here in Canada.

As Anabaptist-Mennonites, we have this rich biblical heritage of following Jesus who showed us the paths of peace and community, reminded us of the presence of God’s Kingdom right here right now, but like the young son in our story, decided it wasn’t good enough, so we have moved into a foreign theological land where we're feeding on the slop of Christian fundamentalism. While living in this strange land with its stern old kings with sticks, we have forgotten that the **heart of the Gospel is the Jesus teaching to love one another, to love each other—even our enemies!**

We are reconciled with God because God, in his infinite love and mercy, went to great lengths to make reconciliation possible. Our challenge is to extend that grace and love to others so that we can be reconciled with others, too. To put it another way, God loves us. We extend that love to others.

We need to live that and share that in a society that increasingly wants nothing to do with Christians, even more so now, I fear, when people see how Christians supported the person who eagerly incited his followers to violence.



Glen Guyton, Executive Director of Mennonite Church USA

¹ <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/glens-blog/attack-on-capitol/>

Today, I find myself saddened by those who understand rigid doctrinal beliefs to be a better sign of God's presence than the act of loving and caring and walking with others in peace and joy and love. Much of today's church has lost contact with that New Testament Church at Antioch, about which they said, **see how they love one another!**² Go back to the book of Acts and see who was present at that Antioch congregation (see Acts 11). It was a crazy bunch of people with a wide diversity of thinking, history, and experience.

It shouldn't be a surprise that we are experiencing division and spiritual hostility with our own familial family members. This strange theological land that we have been spending our inheritance in has reshaped our identity, so that we don't sense any need even to go back home again to a loving God, who every day is sitting on the front porch hoping his son will come home. The prodigal son did come home hoping to survive by getting some of the leftovers from the table of his father's servants, only to be greeted by a dad who threw a feast in his honour.

The Jesus message of the good news of God's love is still valid. The waiting father is still there looking down the path hoping his son will come home. The door is still open to a loving God who is reaching out in the midst of us to love us, and to help us to love each other, praying that we will be reconciled with God **and with everyone with whom we share this world.**

Once again, maybe the really important question for us **IS NOT** what do we have to do to be reconciled with God, but rather do other people experience this reconciling love of God in us. Please God, may it be so. Amen

² Early Church leader, Tertullian, records what pagans of his time were saying about Christians in Antioch: <https://www.lifebpc.com/resources/treasury-of-sermons/46-acts/771-acts-11-19-30-antioch-the-planting-of-a-new-church>