

# God's reconciliation work

## A spiritual exercise for preachers

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**W**hat I offer here is a spiritual exercise, designed especially for preachers, as a way to experience and ponder the reconciling work of God. My intention is not to provide strategies for preaching about reconciliation but rather to foster a spirituality of reconciliation that can serve as a theological foundation for preaching.<sup>1</sup>

This exercise is designed for a six-day period. A focal text, Ephesians 2:11-22, provides a window to your own spiritual pilgrimage, congregational life, and the act of preaching. You may want to use the guide for early morning meditation or even for a six-day retreat. The first day immerses you in the sound of these verses, and subsequent days pick up themes for reflection from this text. Each day includes a personal, congregational, or vocational insight to ponder and a hymn to sing. The endnotes suggest further reading.

### Day 1. Immersing yourself in the spoken Word

Immerse yourself in the words of Ephesians 2:11-22.<sup>2</sup>

*Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.*

*For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,*

*by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new human out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

We often read quickly and silently. The words above were written for the voice and the ear. They were not words on a page but sounds that filled the room where the early church met. I invite you to read this passage out loud as many times and in as many ways as you can think of today—and throughout the coming week. For preachers, those who vocalize the good news, a crucial way to understand any biblical text is through sound.

Recite these words when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on your screen saver, post them on your refrigerator or your bathroom mirror, feel their rhythm as you walk. Try reading them as comedy or tragedy or melodrama or as the day's news. Repeat them when you are happy, sad, bored, excited. Look into the eyes of your significant other and say some of these words like you mean them. Commit to memory the phrases that you like most and repeat them aloud in the privacy of your car as you are running errands. Try including some of these words in your conversations with friends and church members.

Don't think too much for now—and do not run to your commentaries! Receive these words from Ephesians 2 as gift. By the end of the day, they will be in your heart, mind, and sinews.

## Day 2. Seeing God at work reconciling

Reconciliation is God's work. It is not primarily a human action. In the first instance, it is not a strategy about which you do a PowerPoint presentation for your church. Reconciliation is not something we—even we preachers!—bring about. Reconciliation is God's work through Christ: it has been done, it is being done, and it will be done. The dividing wall of hostility has crumbled

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and is crumbling. Those far off and those near have come together, are coming together, and will come together around the cross, making a new humanity.

Today is devoted to pondering this aspect of reconciliation: God has been, is now, and will be at work making peace with you, reconciling those parts of you that are in endless contradiction and debate with one another. God is at work reconciling the

relationships you have with others. God is at work reconciling members of your congregation to one another. Even those members who are far off—people who appear hostile to others in the church or to the church itself—in them, too, the Holy Spirit is at work.

The construction metaphor at the end of our passage confirms that the building has been erected. We may need to do some maintenance, but this building is already built: In Christ “the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” Reconciliation, unity, and peace are not at first something that we make happen in the church. Reconciliation is already happening and will continue to happen. We are being built by the grace of God, in spite of the wreckage that is evident.<sup>3</sup>

Take it as sheer grace today that our God is a God of reconciliation. Look and listen for ways that God is reconciling the world. Let “There's a wideness in God's mercy” be your song for today.<sup>4</sup>

## Day 3. Facing the paradox of reconciliation and conflict

That reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel is well and good, but the reality of conflict is evident daily in personal life, in

families, in the church, in the world around us at every level from local to global. We can say that God has been, is, and will continue to be reconciling people in the context of Christ, but how do we mesh this statement with the fact that walls are still standing, that people are still alienated from one another, that the far and near factions in our congregations are hostile to each other?

Hostility in the church is not a new issue. Pastors and priests through two millennia have preached and cared for souls in conflict in the church. I am comforted by the reality that the whole New Testament provides evidence of church conflict. Early church leaders did not preach and write in a vacuum or from an ivory tower; they proclaimed God's reconciling work among churches suffering from growing pains at the least, and engaging in all-out brawls at worst. For instance, the book of Ephesians was

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written to a real church with a real dividing wall. Early church leaders did not arrive on the scene with fresh conflict management degrees under their belts but with the gospel message of reconciliation. They did not present a strategy for reconciliation as much as *proclaim* God's reconciliation: God has destroyed the wall. Now what does this mean for our lives and our behavior?

We confront a paradox here, as we ponder both the work of God's reconciliation in the church (which has happened, is happening, and will happen), and the divisive character

of churches of the past, present, and future. The gospel, as embodied and preached by Jesus or as lived and proclaimed by early church leaders, often led to conflict. Jesus said once that he came to divide (Luke 12:51-53). When Jesus enacted or preached good news, he faced conflict as a matter of course. For all its human interest, the news of the gospel doesn't always make people feel good; more often than not, it provokes hostility.

Justo L. González has studied early church conflicts in light of present tensions in multicultural churches. He notes that conflict is present in the church precisely because the walls of race, nation, and gender are broken down. Even if they meet under the banner of Christ, a gathering of Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, men

and women, eaters of meat and those who don't eat meat, is bound to include conflict. As González observes, "Rather than shying away from intercultural conflict, Christianity thrived at those edges where conflict was inevitable."<sup>5</sup> In other words, if you want to blame someone for conflicts in the church, blame the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit is gathering together the teen who raps as well as the classical musician, the wealthy and the impoverished, the organic farmer and the pesticide dealer, sparks are bound to fly. We can despair over these differences and thank God for the character of the church: this is where the Spirit is working!

Raise your voice in singing "Here in this place"<sup>6</sup> today, and laugh out loud as you ponder the motley collection of people the Holy Spirit has gathered to your congregation.

#### **Day 4. Recognizing your own longing for reconciliation**

We have habitual ways of understanding biblical stories. For instance, when we refer to the parable of the "Good Samaritan," we have already made some assumptions. In giving it that label, we have already defined what the story is about and named the character we will identify with. One of the joys of reading this parable to my children has been that they do not call it "The Good Samaritan Story" but "The Story of the Hurt Man." My children immediately identify with the man who was hurt rather than with the one who was good. They see themselves in the one who benefits from a compassionate and generous act, not in the rescuer. The story is not a lesson in morality for my children but a story that makes them happy because in it someone receives help, as they like to receive help.

As adults—and especially as Mennonite adults—we are quick to assume the role of the helper, the one who does good. Perhaps we do so because at some stage in our lives we start seeing the Bible as a guide to morality. That is hardly a bad thing, but we are missing much when all we are seeking in the Bible are strategies and models for human action. Do we see from the side of the good Samaritan, and other "good" doers in the stories of the Gospels, because we find it hard to be helped, to receive, to accept the reconciling grace of God? Do a 180-degree turn with your hermeneutic to consider what God is doing and how *you* are receiving God's compassion and generosity.

As preachers, we see the sentence “Jesus came and preached peace,” and immediately we give ourselves a task: I must preach peace! There is much to say about our following Jesus in preaching peace and our doing what the good Samaritan did, but when we go there first, we have skipped a step. The step we miss is that Jesus’ peace is directed to us, and that God’s reconciliation is for us. Naming ourselves as broken recipients of God’s reconciling work is the first step in preaching good news. It is easy for church leaders to say that we need to be about the work of reconciliation, or perhaps that others need reconciliation, when in fact what we need most is to recognize and receive the reconciling work of God in our own lives.<sup>7</sup>

Today ponder a time when you have received help or been forgiven. Recall a time when you were reconciled to someone from whom you had been estranged. Sing “Far, far away from my loving father.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Day 5. The power of words**

Preaching the good news is in and of itself a nonviolent, reconciling act. That “Jesus came preaching peace” has implications for preaching as a means for reconciliation. Along with healing and taking risky and loving actions, a primary way that Jesus came to us with the good news was by using words—by preaching. *What* he said was crucial. *That* he used words, that he used the medium of preaching to reconcile others to God and to one another, is significant. In striking contrast to others in his day, who used violence to try to protect and secure their religious convictions and institutions, Jesus used fragile words to confront hostile people and forces.

Paul, once a persecutor of Christians, became a preacher. He served God with words rather than a sword. People on the street were aware of his change of faith and his changed way of communicating that faith: “The one who was formerly persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy” (Gal. 1:21-22). Paul moved from persecution to preaching, from violence to nonviolence. It is not simply *what* Paul said about uniting Gentiles and Jews, rich and poor, men and women, that merits our attention. *That* he used words to accomplish his mission is key to understanding the close relationship between preaching and reconciliation.

We often wonder *what* we will say in the midst of church conflict, or *what* we might say from the pulpit if we were to do, say, a series of four sermons on reconciliation. But *that* we are preaching—using words and not violence—is significant. It is through the word that God works. According to our scriptures, God creates the world by uttering words in the dark. God reconciles God’s self to us and us to one another with words that fade into the air and are written on our hearts. God works with this fragile medium to address the deepest human wounds, divisions, and longings.<sup>9</sup>

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Today ponder your preaching as a nonviolent, reconciling activity. As you listen to yourself and others talk, note how words can divide and cause hostility. Note also how your words can bring about peace and reconciliation. Sing “What is this place.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Day 6. Preaching reconciliation**

Preaching about reconciliation is a good thing to do. But more than this, week after week preachers are those who dare to hear the Word and use words to speak God’s peace to those far and near. A sermon *on* reconciliation may provide new strategies and even inspire. Conflict mediation techniques, family systems theories, personality tests, and other peacemaking resources are grist for our preaching mills and useful in all arenas where we seek to bring reconciliation. But a sermon that actually does the work of reconciliation, that allows those near and far off to experience and receive God’s reconciliation, is quite a different thing.

A sermon is not an article or an essay. A sermon is an experience. A sermon is not primarily a mode of communication about a topic—biblical or other. A sermon is not so much a discourse *about* God or reconciliation or good news as an *experience of* the good news of God’s reconciling work that has happened, is happening, and will happen.

We step into the pulpit every week with very little really. We stumble to the pulpit with as much need for the reconciling work of God as anyone else brings. We come as one of the motley crew

that the Holy Spirit in her humour and wisdom has assembled on this day. We utter words that vibrate in the air and in the eardrums of those assembled and are absorbed into the walls of the church and sometimes into the hearts and memories of those gathered. This is the place where God's Word, broken by the cross and then raised to new life, seeks to gather all within earshot. The Word sung and uttered gathers those near and far off, making us into a dwelling in which God lives. Our words join what God's Word has done, is doing, and will do. Thus reconciliation is happening and will happen.

Experience it! Believe it! Preach it!<sup>11</sup> Let "How clear is our vocation, Lord" be your song for today.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Books and articles on how to preach and be a good pastor in the midst of conflict abound. See, for instance, William H. Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987). For a general understanding of the role of the pastor in the inevitable conflicts that are a part of church life, see Arthur Paul Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999), and the classic by Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent theological book on God's reconciling work, see Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996). For an easier read, a book that could be used for a book study in your church, see Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (HWB) (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992), #145.

<sup>5</sup> Justo L. González, *For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelation in an Age of Cultural Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999). This short and readable book would also serve well for group study.

<sup>6</sup> HWB #6.

<sup>7</sup> See chapters 8 and 9 of Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1997). A student of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, Campbell takes seriously ethics and the communal nature of the church. He reminds us that the church is not a reiteration of Jesus but derived from Jesus—a gift. We are followers of Christ and recipients of Christ's actions, but we are not necessarily called to do everything that Jesus did. In following Jesus, we ask not so much, "What would Jesus do?" but, "What would a disciple—a receiver of Jesus' reconciliation and grace—do?"

<sup>8</sup> HWB #139.

<sup>9</sup> On preaching as a nonviolent option, see Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the*



*Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 70–86.

<sup>10</sup> HWB #1.

<sup>11</sup> An excellent book that gets to the heart of our vocation as preachers of the Word and users of words in a society where words are paradoxically both meaningless and powerful is Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> HWB #541.

### **About the author**

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