

We beseech you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. [II Corinthians 5: 20]

This morning I'm beginning a three-part sermon series with the title "Reconciliation." Today I'll be considering with you our patterns of personal reconciliation. Next Sunday I'll expand the circle to reflect on reconciliation in our community, and I hope to end up with a look at the prospects for global reconciliation. I'd like to get started with asking you to open up our Book of Common Prayer to the section with the title "Reconciliation." We'll start on page 447; and you'll notice that it says "Form One." Two pages later we'll find "Form Two." I'll talk about the difference between these two forms in a moment.

The 1979 Book of Common Prayer is the first edition to include a rite called "Reconciliation". Before the 1979 Book, it was up to a priest to come up with a suitable wording if someone came and wanted to confess their sins. In fact, it might be a surprise to some even today to know that the Episcopal Church has such a rite in the Prayer Book. Too often we associate the private confession of sins only with the Roman Catholic Church. But they also have changed the name of this rite, no longer calling it Penance or Confession, but by the more appropriate title of Reconciliation.

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This little verse is taken from the Second Letter of St. Paul to the Christians in Corinth, and those of you with long memories might recall we heard it together on the fourth Sunday in Lent, back in March. It's a passage full of hope, and rejoices that "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." What a marvelous thing! We've all had, at some time in our life, a sense of being trapped, locked into mistakes. Perhaps even this morning some of us are carrying around a burden of guilt, a feeling that we can't break free from an obsessive regret for some past misdeeds. But the good news of Jesus is that we can be free from the prison of past sins.

Our Gospel today tells an amazing story of Jesus bringing back to life a widow's only son, her only hope for escaping crushing poverty and possible homelessness. One way of looking at this story is by understanding this astounding display of power as a reassurance: the one who restores physical life can certainly bring reconciliation. Our first reading recounts the prophet Elijah acting in a very similar situation, although we find more of a sense that God is being blamed for the boy's death — so that faith in God is thereby restored when the boy's breath is restored to him.

Back to the rite of Reconciliation. Notice that Form One is only two pages long, while Form Two is nearly twice as long. Form One was set up for a penitent who wants to focus on one or two matters which are haunting his or her soul. The blank line is the place for the penitent

to put into words the negativity, the sinful behavior. And we find a direction for the priest to “offer counsel, direction and comfort”.

On the next page we find a typically Anglican embrace of two different theologies. The first statement of absolution uses the wording “I absolve you from all your sins.” I’m reminded of the beautiful Ash Wednesday service that states that “Almighty God ... has given commandment to his ministers to declare and pronounced to his people, being penitent, the absolution and remission of their sins.” [BCP p. 269] On the other hand, some Episcopal priests with a more modest approach to forgiveness don’t want to say “I forgive you” when it is only **God** who can forgive sins. To accommodate this humbler approach, the second absolution contains the wording “absolve you through my ministry”. And at the end of Form One is a pithy phrase to remind the priest of shared humanity “Go (or abide) in peace, and pray for me, a sinner.”

But then look! There’s a Declaration of Forgiveness to be used by a Lay Person. This means you! Every baptized Christian can administer this sacramental rite. If we turn back to the directions found on page 446, the third paragraph says that “another Christian may be asked to hear a confession.” And that person could be you! It could be someone you know you want to get s burden off her or his chest. Or we can imagine some emergency situation where you might be the one God might use.

As long as we’re on the page with directions, please note the very strong language in the last paragraph. Anglicans are sometimes teased about having wishy-washy theology, but here secrecy is absolute! The priest is not supposed to bring up such topics in future conversations with the person who had been a penitent, and is forever forbidden to share that information with anyone else This is called “the seal of confession.” I’m sometimes asked if it’s difficult to keep such confidences. Well, it’s not difficult to keep from repeating awful things about a person. Ironically, what I find difficult about this is that I cannot share the transforming and life-giving story of God’s Spirit that was at work in a person who had been beaten down by sin and now shares in the new creation. I’m restrained from saying I witnessed reconciliation, new life emerging from a shell of sin.

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I’ll conclude this sermon on Reconciliation with a glance at Form Two, on page 449. The priest and penitent begin together by praying a portion of Psalm 51 (from King David). On the next page the penitent’s statement is a reminder of all the goodness that is ours because we are baptized into Christ’s redeeming death. “But I have squandered the inheritance ... and wandered far in a land that is waste.”

Many of us recognize here the language of Luke’s story of the Prodigal son borrowed here. This second form is composed for someone who’s really in a life-changing moment, turning away from the works of darkness and ready to live now as a child of the light. I’ve had the

privilege of being that human witness to divine power at work in this form, and sometimes I have not been able to hold back tears of joy when I say the concluding words borrowed from the father of the Prodigal son: Now there is rejoicing in heaven; for you were lost, and are found; you were dead, and are now alive in Christ Jesus.

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