

A sermon preached by Pastor Jim Stickney, June 17, 2007, St. John's Episcopal Parish

This morning's sermon is the second in a short sermon series on Reconciliation. Last week I considered personal reconciliation with you, with a close look at the sacramental rite with the actual title: Reconciliation. Next week I will be considering global reconciliation with you. But today I want to address reconciliation within the community — a local focus.

Of the three, the most sensitive aspect of reconciliation is in the community **Personal reconciliation** can be painful, but at some level we control how it goes. Our first reading tries to summarize a notorious sin of King David: his adultery, and his attempts to cover it up that resulted in an innocent man's death. Surely Nathan had to think twice about confronting a powerful king, about whether or not he wanted to put his life on the line to take on King David. Nathan used a parable: a poor man's sheep which a rich man slaughtered — just the thing to catch the conscience of the king with a phrase, "That man is you!" And with **global reconciliation** we're able to take refuge in the thought that we can't change the whole world, that it's enough to do our part.

But **community reconciliation** involves us face to face with other people with whom we might deeply disagree — yet people we are challenged to love. All of us are citizens of several different communities. We're challenged in our families of origin — brothers and sisters, parents and children; and others. I remember hearing of a young man in an Eastern European country before the Berlin Wall came down, asking his priest: "Should I think of the Russians as our brothers or as our friends?" His priest answered, "our brothers, not our friends; we don't have any choice about who is a member of our family."

In the communities of the workplace, we come face to face with people very different from us, who sometimes actively compete with us for our jobs. In schools we're thrown in with strangers, some of whom may be friends, and we all know what kinds of conflicts can emerge on campuses of all sizes.

But this morning we are in the intentional community of a parish church, all of us brought together because of the love of God and by Divine Providence to show forth that love in word and deed in this part of the Bay Area, which we can imagine as a "province" in the Western United States.

We're not so different from the new Christians St. Paul wrote to in Galacia, which was simply a province of cities in the middle of what is now the country of Turkey.

In his letter, Paul can be pretty harsh and directive with them. We find here a record of one of the earliest “church fights,” those scandalous quarrels where the attention of the people of God is focussed inwards, not out to the world.

St. Paul is writing about how his hard work in bringing Christ to the Gentiles is being undercut by the inconsistency of Peter, acting one way with Jews, and another way with Gentiles. I think Peter might have just been tired or bored with tedious disputes between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Paul wants to shock Peter out of his spiritual indecisiveness and be consistent. Conflict in churches shows our continuing need for community reconciliation.

Many years ago I attended a two-day midweek workshop with the alarming title, “Managing conflict in local churches.” Even as I registered for the workshop I was wrestling with my own unrealistic ideal that churches should not *have* conflict, that we should abide in harmony and leave conflicts outside, in “the world.” The people who ran the workshop addressed concerns like mine right away, pointing out that in each human body we find necessary tensions, the different pressures that make our blood pulse through our veins, even the involuntary process of breathing in and breathing out. The Body of Christ also has its creative and life-giving tensions that make it alive; otherwise we’d just be in a group of people who think exactly like we do!

Within the last two weeks you met at this church to share your thoughts and hopes for the new rector you will be calling. I’m like a cheerleader for this process: I wish you well in your work, but I can’t be perceived as influencing the search. Ironically, this means my support involves missing some meetings! But I’m confident at these meetings there are many differences which you express. You don’t all think the same about your church’s past, present and future. The potential for sharp conflict diminishes when you speak your mind for yourself. And the opposite is true: sharp conflict increases when people proclaim that they are speaking on behalf of others, or put words in other people’s mouths.

Sadly, we live in a culture which encourages addiction to anger-adreneline. I’m referring to some TV and radio programs which purport to be about current events, but which end up being a series of willful distortions of what some people say in order to rile up audience members and make them feel righteous and superior.

The local church is not exempt from this form of self-righteous anger. The antidote, to bring about reconciliation, involves both prayer and humility – prayerfully pausing before giving voice to strong feeling, and admitting that one person cannot contain the totality of truth which the Body of Christ needs.

In our Gospel today, Jesus contrasts two kinds of sinners, obvious and subtle. This woman who bathed Jesus' feet with her tears and her ointment must have been a source of both embarrassment and high drama for all present. Luke tells us that she was a sinner, and the Pharisee reinforces that judgment.

Jesus tells a parable, about the two debtors, one of whom owed ten times as much. In this way Jesus is like the prophet Nathan, confronting King David. But Jesus is not trying to reform a sin of passion — the woman is already repentant. Instead, Jesus is after a more subtle prize, the heart of a man which is cold. Simon the Pharisee keeps the externals of the law, but is far from reconciled to the presence of this woman of ill repute. His high level of moral conduct ironically has shriveled up his heart into a harsh, joyless and loveless shell. He serves as a lesson for people whose moral evolution looks great on the outside.

Christ Jesus wants us to keep our *inner hearts* joyful and not get calloused!
Christ Jesus wants us to live in a spirit of reconciliation one with another, and love ourselves as God loves us — without limit. For we are God's beloved and we are building the beloved community, in the name of Christ Jesus. Amen.