

In Christ, God was reconciling the whole world to himself. [II Corinthians 5: 19]

This morning's sermon is the last in a short sermon series on Reconciliation. Two weeks ago I considered personal reconciliation with you, with a close look at the sacramental rite with the actual title: Reconciliation. Last week I addressed reconciliation within the community – with other people with whom we often disagree – and yet people we are challenged to love. This morning I'll expand the theme of reconciliation to include the entire world, and the Scripture verse I'm using as a refrain is from II Corinthians:

In Christ, God was reconciling the whole world to himself.

Perhaps the simplest way to enter into this cosmic vision of a reconciled world is to take an expansive look at the Gospel story of the feeding of multitudes, the only miracle of Jesus which is recounted in all four Gospels. In fact, if one follows the lead of some Scripture scholars, this Gospel passage is repeated in Matthew, Mark and Luke in **two** forms, one remembered in the oral tradition that preceded the written Gospels as the feeding of 5,000 and a variant recollection of four thousand people fed. However we view this event, it made an indelible impression on Jesus' followers.

This miraculous meal is followed up right away by this morning's passage, in which we hear that Jesus is simultaneously "alone" and also "with his disciples". Jesus is *praying* alone – meaning that he is away from the multitudes. Jesus might have been praying *with* his disciples present in the same place. All of this scene-setting on Jesus' part gets them ready for a crucial question, which he divides into two parts. First he asks, "who do the people say that I am?" This is not like a politician using focus groups to project a popular image. Jesus is not about to change what he does in order to beguile potential contributors. By asking about what the multitudes think, Jesus sets up the **real** question: "But who do *you* say that I am?"

Of course we have impetuous Peter stepping right up, perhaps surprising himself by blurting out the perfect answer: "the Christ of God". Peter's next actions will sadly reveal that he doesn't have much of a clue what that phrase really means, but he will learn soon enough the depths to which this title will lead him. I think it's a mistake for us to limit the question to Peter and the original twelve. Jesus asks **us** this double question: What do *the others* say? what do *you* say? And I don't believe we answer the question once and for all. I have a poster in my office with some of the titles linked to Jesus found in the Scriptures. And believers have added many more titles, like "Liberator" & "Lover of my Soul". As we deepen our faith, our response to Jesus' question also deepens.

At least for this morning, I'd like to propose this title: **World-Reconciler**. Christianity is the world's most populous religion, and even though some proclaim that in Europe the church

is stagnant, in this country Christianity is steady, and in the southern hemisphere and even in parts of Asia, Christianity is growing. Why should it be surprising that growing in Christ involves growing pains? I take a much calmer view of the inter-church tensions which make the news. Specifically, the much-rumored breakup of the Anglican Communion is greatly exaggerated. As the risk of sounding whimsical, think of a teenager. Parents have structured a life for their child, so rebellion is a healthy (although frustrating) thing.

For centuries the Christians in places like Africa took orders from Western leaders. Now we find some vigorous African Bishops wanting to turn the tables, showing up here and pointing to what they perceive as decadence. Some say, "You evangelized us, and now it is our turn to re-evangelize you!"

Can we take the long view here? Can we let the energetic young churches of the southern hemisphere stretch in their own growing pains? After all, what are our southern Christian brothers and sisters up against at home? It's a militant Islam, which permits a man to have up to four wives on a continent where polygamy has been a part of society for millennia.

Western concerns for just and equal treatment for gay and lesbian people can seem to be a liability for African Christians competing with Islam for converts. In our global village, truly, nothing that is spoken in secret will not soon be shouted from the housetops and in cyberspace, as Jesus foresaw that it would. So to help us foster a spirit of reconciliation, our Presiding Bishop has pointed out that the news media who speak apocalyptically of an Episcopal church schism are in reality reporting on one-half of one percent of all of our Episcopal parishes. What does that look like? It means that in a parish (like ours) of 200 members, one member is considering leaving. So – "zero point five percent" is not a schism.

Of course in the spirit of the good shepherd who seeks after the lost sheep, we trust that ninety-nine percent will be fine on their own as we try to stay engaged with a couple of strays who may be parting company with the rest of us. But as a way of keeping us from becoming a little too "churchy" about all this, I remind you of the Millennium Development Goals adopted by our church. from the United Nations program to cut world poverty in half by the year 2015. Ushers will distribute reminders of these goals after the service. They are:

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Promote gender equality
- Improve maternal health
- Combat HIV/ AIDS, malaria, etc.
- Achieve universal primary education
- Reduce child mortality
- Ensure environmental sustainability
- Global development partnership

No one of us can do all of these things. Each one of us can undertake a part of a goal. The more we work to achieve to these goals, people in places like Africa will be much better off. Even though some churchy tensions will likely remain, meeting these goals can bring about nothing less than global reconciliation.

In Christ, God was reconciling the whole world to himself.