

Reconciled: 3. Reconciled with Each Other
2 Corinthians 5:17-18; Matthew 1:18-19
December 13, 2020
Pastor Steve Richards

We are in the midst of series called Reconciled. This is the season for reconciliation. It is the story of Christmas. God was acting in Jesus to reconcile us to God so that we can be reconciled with each other.] **God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation.** As I said last week, the best part of the holiday season is relationships, and the hardest part of the holiday season is relationships. Those of us who have siblings have probably experience both parts.

I have three siblings, and growing up, I think the rivalry between us was most pronounced at Christmas. Whatever appeared under the Christmas tree seemed to be a measure of which one of us was the favorite. Our parents were extra careful to spend the same amount on each of us – to the penny, but as we watched each other open our gifts we weren't doing the math – and if my sister got something that I wanted it didn't matter the cost, I knew who really mattered! Two weeks ago, I held up the guitar that I received when I was thirteen. Two years later my sister who is two years behind me also received a guitar, but hers was much nicer than mine. My parents said it's because hers was on sale, but I knew better. I knew that gift was announcing favored child status and I think part of the reason my guitar stayed in the case for so many years was because I was pouting about what she had received.

Do you know about sibling rivalry? It is part of the human story from the beginning. Genesis chapter 4: we find the story of Cain and Abel. Cain felt God loved his brother Abel more – and so Cain killed his brother Abel! Thankfully, my sibling relationships have never come close to that. And our two daughters are actually quite close. We don't choose our siblings. But, we do get to choose how to respond to our siblings and that's what we discover in this week's Christmas story, a story you probably never associated with Christmas. Think about any broken relationship in your life – with family members or friends or exes. Is there some relationship in need of healing?

Last week's story was Tamar and to tell her story we heard about Judah, her father-in-law and also the father of her children. Judah was one of twelve brothers. Jacob had sons by his first wife Leah and his second wife Rachel and also by Leah's servant Zilpah and Rachel's servant Bilhah. This was a family ripe for sibling rivalry, and in the pecking order, the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah were considered the lowest and the sons of Rachel, who was Jacob's favorite, had the highest status. At this point in the story, Benjamin had yet to be born, so the favorite was number 11 – Joseph. Joseph knows he is the favorite and is constantly picking on his older brothers and tattletailing to his father. One year, when it was gift giving time, Jacob gives a gift to Joseph, an ornate coat of many colors. And none of the others receive a gift. Everyone knew Joseph was the favorite and Jacob did nothing to hide it. How did his other sons feel about that? **When his brothers saw that their father loved [Joseph] more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.** Nobody goes to Dad to complain about the way he is playing favorites. No one ever talks about the root of the problem, and isn't that what sometimes happens in families. The real issue is never addressed. One sign of trouble – that could not even speak a kind word to him. Instead, we find withdrawal, avoidance, passive/aggressive tendencies. The wound are deep; the hurt profound. And Joseph is constantly pouring salt in the wound until one day, his brothers decided to kill him. However, one brother named Judah suggests an alternative. Sell Joseph to slave traders, take his coat and cover it with goat's blood, bring it to Dad so he will think Joseph is dead. And that's what

they do. **“We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son’s robe.” He recognized it and said, “It is my son’s robe!** They didn’t even have to lie. The robe could lie for them. Believing Joseph to be dead, Jacob is inconsolable. It turns out, they got rid of their brother, but it doesn’t get them what they want. They don’t get their father’s love. This family is broken.

For the next twenty years, Joseph is lost to them. He is kidnapped, enslaved, unjustly imprisoned, and then one day he provides comfort to other prisoners. It seems his imprisonment has changed him. Joseph has this gift of discernment, and he is brought before Pharaoh and interprets Pharaoh’s dreams in a way that saves all of Egypt. Joseph becomes the Prime Minister of Egypt. Meanwhile back in Canaan, Jacob and his other sons are starving. They are in the grip of a severe famine, and in order to survive, Jacob send his remaining sons – all but Benjamin who is now his new favorite son. He send them to Egypt beg for food. It has been 22 years since they saw Joseph. Ironically, he’s the one with the authority to provide them with the food they need to survive. They don’t recognize him, but he recognizes them. At first, he speaks harshly to them, accusing them of being spies. **“No, my lord,” they answered. “Your servants have come to buy food. We are all the sons of one man. Your servants are honest men, not spies.”** Honest men? Joseph knows that’s not true. So he tells them to return home and come back with the rest of their family and then he will decided what to do. Why does Joseph do this? Why not tell them who he is? If Joseph wanted revenge, that would have been easy. What Joseph wants reconciliation and that will take trust. Can he trust them to return with their brother Benjamin? Can they trust that Joseph will help them? Without trust, reconciliation is not possible.

The brothers do return, this time with their youngest and their father’s favorite, Benjamin. Joseph provides the food that they need, but sets a trap for them that requires they leave Benjamin behind something the brothers know would kill their father. He lost Joseph and to lose Benjamin would be more than their father would bear. That’s when Judah speaks up. Judah who had the original idea to sell Joseph into slavery and deceive his father – Judah who we learned last week deceived and then raped his daughter-in-law Tamar – Judah now makes the longest and most impassioned speech in the book of Genesis. Judah offers to take his brother, Benjamin’s place – he will sacrifice his life for his brother. And in that moment, Joseph sees how Judah has changed. Reconciliation is possible. Attempts at reconciliation can fail if they are done too quickly or done with somebody who is not genuinely repentant or trustworthy. One side or the other can decided to forgive – to let go of the bitterness and resentment, but reconciliation is something more than that. It is the building of a relationship and that requires time and repentance, and a demonstration of trustworthiness. And after 22 years, that’s what happens between Judah and Joseph. The relationship is healed, and a family is restored. That’s Christmas!

A German-based grocery store released an ad showing the length to which a mother would go to reconcile with her daughter. As the ad begins, the mother is haunted by the guilt of her past. She stands in her guest room, staring at a quilt that reminds her of a memory from the past that shattered a family relationship. Take a look: [video] However long the path might seem, take a step toward Christmas. It’s called reconciliation.

We’re told: **Joseph gave them carts... and he also gave them provisions... To each of them he gave new clothing.** It doesn’t say this, but my guess is that he got them all coats of many colors.

Years later, when Jacob is on his death-bed, he offers a blessing to each of his sons, and the most important blessing is given not to Joseph or to Benjamin, but to Judah. Judah will be the one from whom the Messiah will come.

This Christmas where is God calling you to reconcile or at least seek it? Maybe its your brother or sister, your mom or dad, your son or daughter, your ex, somebody at work or school. Will it be heard and messy and take repeated conversations and even 22 years of waiting? Maybe. I know this – if there is a difficult person in your life and if you'll make a commitment to make the call or write the note, to pursue reconciliation in light of what God through Jesus has already done for you, then you will experience the story of Christmas.

There was another young man named Joseph who could have walked away from a troubled relationship with a young woman named Mary. No one would have blamed him for walking away. Everyone would have understood, but he took a step toward the relationship and as a result they both experienced Emmanuel – God with us. Maybe you've been betrayed by an ex or a child rejected you or a business partner cheated you or a brother abused you. You may have been lied to or lied about – deliberately, openly, unconfessed. This is the season of Emmanuel. You don't make this journey of reconciliation alone. God did not give up on the dream of reconciliation, and God has not and will not give up on you.

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 13, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Dear God, today we give thanks that your promise to be with us is true. Draw us closer to you and as we do, let your love also draw us closer to each other. Amen.

Monday, December 14

Scripture: Genesis 49:8

Judah, you are the one your brothers will honor; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you.

Observation: To be reconciled is to restore or heal a relationship. In worship, Pastor Steve told the story of Judah. You can read this story in Genesis chapters 37-49. It is a story of sibling rivalry that took an almost deadly turn when Joseph's brothers decided to kill him. Instead, Judah sold his brother into slavery and convinced his father that Joseph was dead. He also took advantage of his daughter-in-law, Tamar (chapter 38). And yet he later offered to sacrifice himself for the sake of his father and brother. He reconciled with Joseph and would be the ancestral source for Israel's kings. Judah's line eventually led to the birth of Jesus.

Application: Redemption and reconciliation are possible. Judah's past behavior did not define who he would become. As one who brought about division and harm within the family, he ultimately became a leader and a healer. What can we learn about reconciliation from Judah and Joseph? Reflect on relationships with your family, friends, co-workers, etc. Where is God calling you to be reconciled?

Prayer: Thank you, God, for second chances. When I miss the mark, when I hurt others, when I allow a wounded relationship to remain broken, help me to see my role and to see who you know I can be. Grant me the wisdom to know what to do and the courage to do it. Amen.

Tuesday, December 15

Scripture: Isaiah 65:17; 2 Corinthians 5:17-18

Look! I'm creating a new heaven and a new earth: past events won't be remembered; they won't come to mind.

So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived! All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

Observation: Hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah spoke of a time when God would restore God's relationship with Israel, and this new creation would be the peaceable kingdom (Isaiah 65:18). The followers of Jesus turned to the words of Isaiah and recognized that's what God was doing in Jesus. In his letter to the new Christians in Corinth, the apostle Paul saw this new creation was happening in those who came to faith. By what he/they experienced in Christ, divisions could be healed and relationships reconciled.

Application: Haven't we all been at places in life when we wanted – even needed – a fresh start. That “new creation” is the promise we find in the birth of Jesus who taught that coming close to each other is inseparably tied to coming close to God. When have you felt especially close to God? How has such moment had an impact on your relationship with others? And if you have not felt close to God, this is the season when God wants to come close. This is the promise of Christmas.

Prayer: O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today. O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel. Amen. (Verse 4 from the carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.)

Wednesday, December 16

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-19

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.

Observation: Here is a relationship that was tested by circumstances that were unexpected, scandalous, and beyond this couple's ability to control. In the first century, betrothal was a time period of up to a year in which a couple was in every respect married except they did not live together. During the engagement, Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant and he was not the father. We all could make assumptions at this point, but Mary had an unbelievable explanation and Joseph had a decision to make. Their decision to walk together into the future changed the course of history – and countless lives through history.

Application: How would our perspective change in the moment when we face truly consequential decisions if we somehow acknowledge that God is present? Mary and Joseph

would walk together, but not alone. How does knowing the Creator of the Universe is ready to walk alongside you give you the ability to choose what is difficult?

Prayer: Merciful God, hear me. Thank you that you are always ready to listen to the cries of my heart, even in those moments when I do not have the words to express what I am feeling. Help me to know that you are walking with me and will give me the strength for all that I face. Amen.

Thursday, December 17

Scripture: Luke 1:26-33

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom."

Observation: When Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel, today's reading says she was "confused." Other translations say, "troubled." It must have been a confusing, troubling moment for a 14-year-old girl. Little girls then did not grow up hoping to give birth to the Messiah. Their future depended on giving birth to a child but within the context of marriage. This announcement would disrupt her family and her community, not to mention her own life. But Mary's would be the story of trust in God's providence.

Application: We live in a world of science. If we received this announcement, we would have a long list of questions and even with the answers we would not be ready to accept this announcement (though the weeks and months ahead would provide the proof). Mary trusted without knowing all there was to know. Mary took the next steps with faith. Remember: Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see. (Hebrews 11:1) How is God showing up in your life?

Prayer: God, keep me open to the ways you can work in my life. Knowing you are with me, I am ready to listen and to see how you can show up in my life today. Amen.

Friday, December 18

Scripture: Luke 1:39-45

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

Observation: Mary traveled to the home of her relative Elizabeth who also had a story of her pregnancy to match the one that Mary had. Elizabeth, who had been unable to have a child and had aged beyond child-bearing age, had miraculously become pregnant and her husband,

Zechariah, would remain speechless until the child was born. Elizabeth's welcome to Mary was exactly what she needed – immediate understanding, immediate acceptance, immediate love.

Application: We all need an Elizabeth in our lives, someone we can turn to who will listen, understand, and accept us. Do you have an “Elizabeth” in your life? We all need to be an “Elizabeth” to someone. Whose Elizabeth are you?

Prayer: Thank you, God, that there are people who are ready to offer themselves as mentors and companions. I give thanks for those who have accepted me and encouraged me. Help me to always be ready to come alongside someone with compassion, wisdom, and understanding. Amen.

Saturday, December 19

Scripture: Philippians 2:3-8

Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus: Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Observation: Here is what God was doing by sending Jesus into the world. God finally decided to enter the world, “becoming like human beings,” experiencing all of the joys, struggles and pain of life in this world. Jesus would experience the joy and the heartache of relationships, even broken relationships. In this letter from the apostle Paul, we are given a path to encouragement and love – that is, the path to reconciliation – by imitating Jesus.

Application: Have you ever wondered how far God might go to establish a relationship with you? Christmas provides that answer. How do you know that God loves you? How could you be for another what God is for you (Emmanuel – “with us”)?

Prayer: Lord, this Christmas, help me to see myself through your eyes. Empower me to love myself, so that I may then go and love others in your name. Amen.