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## **Won't You Be My Neighbor: Reconciliation**

### **2 Corinthians 5:14-19**

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When I look into the face of anyone, I see my brother, I see my sister... When I look into the face of anyone, I see my neighbor. "Won't you be my neighbor?" Those famous words from Mr. Rogers. He taught generations of children about what it means to be a neighbor and that life is like a neighborhood. Everyone we encounter is our neighbor. The neighborhood is made up of people of all colors, all faiths, each person a child of God. In light of recent events, we are more aware that many neighborhoods have experienced racism and injustice, and you and I are called to love our neighbor. One way to love our neighbors is to work toward reconciliation.

The little girl in the video saw each person as her neighbor. Little did she know that she was beginning the journey of reconciliation. We are in a worship series entitled, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" Last week Jason Kramme shared how we can be a neighbor by leaning into restorative justice. And this week, I am going to share how reconciliation is part of that journey. It is a journey that Jesus calls us to as children of God.

Today's reading is from 2 Corinthians 5:14-19. The apostle Paul wrote, "And God gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation." This message of reconciliation is that all have been reconciled to God in Christ. That is wonderful, great news. To be reconciled is to have a broken relationship restored. Our broken relationship with God is being restored, made new in Jesus Christ. Jesus is leading the way of reconciliation with God and giving us the way to be reconciled to one another.

The events of this past month have brought a new awareness of reconciliation. George Floyd cannot be just another name added to a list of senseless killings. He was created in the image of God, and his life mattered. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to the ministry of reconciliation. And now more than ever, our black and brown brothers and sisters need to hear our voices and see our actions toward reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a journey, not to be confused with forgiveness. Reconciliation is different from forgiveness. Reconciliation is taking forgiveness to another level.

I always thought that forgiveness and reconciliation

were the same thing. For instance, as a little girl, I loved playing Barbies with my friends. We would get together, divide up the Barbies, their clothes, their furniture, and set up our little towns. We would play for hours. However, once in a while a Barbie War would erupt. It could get pretty heated. If we wanted to keep playing we would have to work it out. Eventually one of us would apologize, and the other would say, "You're forgiven," and then we would go back to our Barbies as if nothing happened. Broken relationship restored!

I understood that if I forgave someone, it also meant that we were completely reconciled. I no longer had any bitter feelings towards them, and our friendship/relationship was exactly the way it was before the fight. I had this understanding for quite some time, because it worked. And it still does, in many ways. For example, when my husband and I hurt each other, we apologize, ask for forgiveness, grant it, and reconciliation is quick because we have a foundation, a relationship built on love and trust.

But then I encountered hurt on another level in a very toxic relationship. I was interacting with a friend who often put me down. I eventually told this friend how I felt. My friend apologized, I forgave her. I thought we were reconciled. But I was wrong. She continued to treat me exactly as she had before, maybe even worse. I said something again, she apologized again, I forgave her again. This happened over and over and over. I asked myself, "Why wasn't forgiveness working? Why haven't things changed between us? The relationship still brings me so much hurt!" So then....

I prayed that God would change this person's behavior. "Please, just make her be nice to me!" I prayed, even more as all of this was having a toll on my mental health. I was walking on eggshells around her, trying to prevent her from treating me badly, which turned out to be impossible. There was forgiveness. I could forgive her, but reconciliation....that takes two people to change, not one. It didn't happen.

Through that experience I learned that reconciliation is different from forgiveness. Forgiveness means that you will not hold the wrong against the person. No apology is necessary for forgiveness to occur. The one offended does the forgiving, the one being forgiven often doesn't even know they have been forgiven or maybe even care. Forgiveness sets up the possibility of reconciliation. But forgiveness does not equal reconciliation. Forgiveness can happen without ever talking to the one who you forgive. Reconciliation requires both parties to work together to reconcile, to restore the broken relationship.

My friend who repeatedly put me down had no desire to change her behavior towards me. I forgave her, but there was no reconciliation because she refused to recognize her part.

In the case of racism, many of us don't see how we have contributed to it. However, we all have. We have been living in a system that oppresses people of color. And we have been called beyond forgiveness to reconciliation. We need to recognize our part. Today's text reveals that in Christ we no longer live for ourselves. We live a new life with Christ in us, through his love. We are called to live with love and work towards reconciliation.

What does reconciliation look like? Let's start with the definition. It means "coming together." Strictly speaking, reconciliation implies a process, that of restoring the shattered relationship between two people.

Why is reconciliation important? It is important for us because we have been reconciled with God through Jesus Christ. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians: *"He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation."*

Reconciliation is possible because of what God is doing for us in Jesus. You and I have been given the gift to reconcile, to bring together that which has been broken. And we do this through the gift of the Holy Spirit that dwells inside each one of us. So as people of God, we are people of reconciliation. And now is the time to come together to mend that which has been broken for so long.

Racial reconciliation is about creating equity and equality in education, employment, life expectancy, and all areas of disadvantage. This is the message of Jesus. This gap begins to close through building relationships.

The story of what's going on in our country isn't new. It goes all the way back for centuries. Our system is broken, and we continue to break relationships when we allow our brothers and sisters to live in oppression.

Many people today haven't understood the depth of racism in America, myself included. When taking the opportunity to study and learn about racism, many want to do something about it...to change the oppression, to seek reconciliation. But the work of reconciliation can seem overwhelming.

The more we become aware, we think, "Wow! I don't even know where to start. This thing is so fractured, I don't even know how to put these pieces back together." Yet, our faith is a way forward, with Jesus offering a model for healing and reconciliation.

As people of God, we have hope. Our hope comes alive when we're willing to have the courage to embark on the journey of reconciliation. Reconciliation requires that both parties are actively working for the good of the other person and the good of the relationship. What are some steps we can take towards racial reconciliation?

One thing we can do is ask ourselves as a church, "What are we missing?" We often (particularly those of white privilege) don't think about what we are missing. We look at all we have and ask, "How can we bring more diversity to this awesome place that we already have?" We rarely ask, "What are we missing, and how should people of color speak into that space?" One step that we can take is to learn and understand the gifts of people who are missing. A lot of times, we don't know the story of our black and brown brothers and sisters. So we can open ourselves up to listen and to learn stories that we have never heard.

The second thing is to look at the gifts and the story and ask, "What does it look like for us to engage in a ministry of reconciliation?" Often, there's a lack of cultural intelligence. I know my culture, how we see the world around us. Our black and brown brothers and sisters know their culture, how they see the world around them. We often talk and see the the same things, but in reality, the perception of our worlds can be really different. There are times we just can't see from another's perspective. Taking the next step is asking for clarification. Asking for clarification helps us to learn and grow.

Last, as we understand the stories, we seek to do something with what we're learning – to engage in a new way of connecting. It's not enough for us to have a shared knowledge and a shared language to have better conversations. It's not enough for us to be friends across racial and cultural lines. Because nothing gets done outside relationship. Reconciliation is about building relationships. Restoring relationships which have been broken. God has done that for us through Jesus Christ. Broken relationships are built one at a time. It does take time. Reconciliation is a process. Patience is required.

Sometimes I wish I could go through with a magic wand and change every single heart overnight so that the next day there isn't one racist person in the world. I don't have a magic wand, but I do have God. And God has given each one of us the power of the Holy Spirit to give us creative solutions to engage in the work of reconciliation. The work of reconciliation is a process; it doesn't happen overnight; it is a journey that we are on with God. That's ultimately our call as followers of Jesus. So we are on a journey toward reconciliation. We each have a part to play. Where is the Spirit leading you on the journey of reconciliation today?