

The Rev. Joanne Sanders  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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## The Bottom Line

*“I will arise and go to my father.” Luke 15:18*

*“God...has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation.” 2Cor. 5:19*

One writer reminded me this week that when this familiar parable comes up – the Parable of the Prodigal Son – people like me – preachers – often end up talking about the elder brother. You know, the one with whom churchgoing, civic-minded, religiously devoted folk can identify. The one who has tried to live a good life and generally has done so. The elder brother’s life is the one that tends to look most like theirs. He is the one whose sin they can confess in their hearts: sometimes we too can begrudge the good fortune of others if we think it is undeserved. Sometimes we can be jealous too. What touches God’s heart does not open ours – sometimes we hang onto our legalistic rightness, even after God has forgiven. The elder brother is the everyman of the prosperous and good.

To the contrary, I was challenged instead to: “Preach this parable in a poor neighborhood sometime. Preach it in a place where people are half an inch from disaster, a paycheck away from homelessness. Preach it where people are homeless already. Preach it to a bunch of addicts. Preach it to people whose need is more naked than that of those of us who can afford to cover it up. Then you will find yourself preaching about the prodigal himself, about the guts it takes to stand up and say you’ve reached the end of your rope. No one in town is surprised when a mistake in judgment ends up costing everything; it happens all the time. And everyone knows that sometimes you lose everything even when you didn’t make a mistake. That happens all the time too. Sudden disaster that sweeps everything away, or failure that costs you everything. Those who have been down and out hear of the welcoming, forgiving father and his feast of restoration, and know that they need him. His embrace is the sweetest of dreams.”

You might be familiar with the phrase “*the bottom line.*” That which, no matter what happens, we refuse to compromise or discard. For some it might be the sanctity of

life - “whatever happens I would never kill another human being.” For others it might be the sanctity of truth – “I could never tell a lie.”

What might be *the bottom line* in this parable of the two sons and the father? I have a few volumes in a commentary set called The New Interpreter’s Bible that refers to the other passage we heard this morning from the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians that Mary read for us as “the heart of the gospel.” That no other passage more fully encapsulated the Christian message than this one. *The bottom line?* – reconciliation.

These words of the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter are attributed as written by Paul to the unruly church at Corinth. Paul was writing out of his own experience as a strong persecutor of the early Christians before his conversion on the road to Damascus, and this classic statement in

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this letter about reconciliation perhaps speaks volumes about what Paul thought for him was *the bottom line*. “God in Christ reconciling the world to God...and entrusting us with the message of reconciliation.” If anyone stood in need of being reconciled to God it was surely Paul. If anyone stood in need of reconciliation it surely was the younger son, and I would venture to say, even the elder son. The heart of the gospel, this new reality of which Paul so passionately wrote, was of God crossing the distance that separates us, or God doing the reconciling.

What in the world could that mean: “God doing the reconciling?” Let’s approach it a different way and think of a word that is quite opposite to reconciliation: estrangement or separation. We might not be clear about we think reconciliation is, but I suspect we are very clear about what estrangement is, for we have all experienced it in one form or another. So did the prodigal son. So do we live daily in the midst of it. Familial, religious, political and sexual estrangement, to name a few, are all too common these days.

One of Albert Camus’s early novels was called The Stranger, sometimes also referred to as The Outsider. And we can often feel as both. Neglected, overlooked or even actively

excluded. If we take the word to its fullest meaning, we discover that we are estranged: a. from one another, b. from creation, the world in which we live, and c. from God – all three in varying and changing proportions. Estrangement? We are all in that club indeed.

But what overcomes it? Reconciliation – no longer being separated from one another, but united once again; no longer cut off from one another, but in communication; no longer strangers to one another but friends and partners who can share fully; no longer at loose ends, but standing on firm ground. Reconciliation at its best has been defined most profoundly as “the restoring of personal relationships with other human beings, with creation, and with God.” The example of the father in the parable of the prodigal son today demonstrates a radical commitment to reconcile – to not only be as one forgiven, but to forgive; not only to be welcomed, but to welcome; not only to receive compassion, but offer compassion as well.

It is the extravagant claim of Paul, the parables -and that of Christianity - that this is exactly what has happened in God’s gift to us in Jesus Christ: the breach between God and ourselves and our world has been overcome. Distance has been replaced by closeness. There is no way we can make our way to God, but God has rendered that unnecessary by making a way to us, embodied in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth. A God initiated, God reconciling act.

Nevertheless, I am convinced this is far from the whole definitive story of *the bottom line* – that is, reconciliation. There is clearly another emphasis in this particular passage from Paul’s letter to Corinth that we can’t escape – because it deals with us. In fact it is so important, that in case you don’t remember I’ll review, mentioned in three verses: 1. God has enlisted us in the work of reconciliation 2. God has entrusted us with the message of

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reconciliation 3. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors. If reconciliation seems initially one-sided, it now essentially becomes two-sided. If we have been given the gift as those who have been reconciled, we are to live it, we are to

express it, and we are to make sure it gets around. We must be – to use Paul's words – ambassadors of reconciliation.

Ambassadors have been defined as "people who have been validated by their government to transact business on the government's behalf, to be message bearers to other political powers, not trying to sell themselves, but trying to argue persuasively for the concerns of those they represent." Precisely the kind of task for which an ambassador of reconciliation is set apart.

Well that surely lets me off the hook you might be thinking. I'm far too unimportant and mainstream to be an ambassador.

Allow me to remind you of one of the great saints of our time, Archbishop Oscar Romero, and how he was an ambassador of reconciliation in El Salvador. You might think – well he was special – he was a public figure – an archbishop. But the real secret is what you may not know – that in fact he was quite ordinary. He did not stand out in a crowd. He was not a born leader or a spellbinding orator. He was picked to be the archbishop at a tense time in El Salvador precisely because he was ordinary and could be trusted not to cause any problems to church or state by getting out of line. To the contrary, his life and martyr's death of an ordinary man of the people was used to do great things – siding with the poor, challenging the powerful. Oscar Romero's story means that we can never write our own stories on the assumption that we are too unimportant to make a difference.

Coincidentally, the people of El Salvador today, March 21, are electing a new president. "The weak and forgotten want to return home. The rich and haughty want to maintain their historic privilege. And many who dream of justice and equity want to prepare a table of celebration where no one will go hungry," says one writer.

"The parallels between El Salvador and the United States in this moment are manifold. Political and economic power tries to hang on. Fear is sown among the people so that they will prefer security to freedom and justice. Corruption and greed mark the halls of privilege."

*Reconciliation* "is the welcoming home of the prodigal, the finding a place and voice for the excluded, the shedding of privilege and power to make room for the weak."

*Reconciliation* "is the making of a choice, an option. Reconciliation chooses the weakest and lifts them up, finds the broken and works for justice. Reconciliation always looks for

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life as its sign. Where sickness and death reign, justice is to be found where people live in solidarity and compassion, longing for God's dream to be realized.”

*Reconciliation* “waits and looks far off, and throws a great fiesta when the lost is found, when those who are dead are brought back to life.”

While reconciliation can and does apply to one on one relationships, – it clearly stretches us beyond where we are, for reconciliation is to inform everything that we do. Our texts today illustrate that God was not only reconciling a father and prodigal son, disciples, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, the powerless and the powerful, but in fact the whole world. Is there anything outside the realm of God's reconciling activity? Difficult question. If God seems to provide an example of reaching out to achieve reconciliation, then ought we do the same? Easier said than done.

We are ambassadors of reconciliation when we establish creative rather than destructive relationships between nature and human nature, between the goodness of God's creation and the mess we have made of it. This requires not only new attitudes but also new laws and regulations about the environment.

We are ambassadors of reconciliation when we refuse to discriminate against other persons because they are gay or lesbian, farm laborers, Muslims or Jews, or people whose politics or theology we abhor. Perhaps, as recently witnessed in the city of San Francisco, civil disobedience is justified.

We are ambassadors of reconciliation when we work to change unjust laws against the poor, children, homeless or elderly – all of which require an ongoing look at priorities within federal, state and city budgets.

We are ambassadors of reconciliation, as two Stanford freshmen provided an example for me recently, when we lay proposals on the table to find common ground and seek to bring a broad range of religious traditions together on campus to integrate religious practice and academic study and foster dialogue, community and scholarship. This for the distinct purpose of having conversation about the difficult issues we face as a nation and globe.

Reconciliation, needless to say, is not about being nice to people, or trying to avoid conflict.

I don't like to face problems head on, says Linus to Charlie Brown in one of my favorite Peanuts cartoons. I think the best way to solve problems is to avoid them. This is a distinct philosophy of mine. No problem is so big or so complicated that it can't be run away from.

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Even though this is both humorous and honest insight into human nature we know we cannot run away. There is too much at risk. And our current problems, both here and abroad seem beyond complicated. Indeed, reconciliation is needed from within already existing conflict. Ambassadors of reconciliation must be working precisely in the midst of estrangement.

And at this time and place, in the midst of a war- ravaged conflict- torn globe, in the midst of a nation whose constitution threatens to be amended to consciously allow discrimination, and in the midst of growing political polarization and imperial leadership – we are faced with a stern, seemingly relentless agenda. And have become deeply estranged in many ways, individually and collectively.

But the word from the ancient texts of our Christian story today is to not only rejoice, but to have hope. Because in each moment we live in a brand new situation, because God has reconciled us to one another, and because we have the privilege of being that reconciling love ourselves, over and over again. These are the givens. Let them bring our wandering, prodigal spirits back, and lead us in paths of truth and grace.

***O God, we are grateful that you have broken through our estrangement with your reconciling love to reestablish full relationship with us. We are sorry for the times we live as if that were not so. Show us those places where we are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation, and empower us to be agents of love and restoration.***

Amen.

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