

**God's Peace**  
Colossians 1: 15 - 23  
June 7, 2009

I. Introduction

- A. Have you ever watched a little girl get her new dress dirty just before church?
  - 1. Asks Steve Brown in his book, The Prime Principle
- A. Little girls get their dresses dirty sometimes when they really don't mean to
  - 1. And then they're faced with a number of options.
- A. They can try to hide the dirt by folding the dress over and walking close to their mother.
  - 1. Or they can pretend that they don't know about the dirt:
    - a. "Dirt? I didn't know there was any dirt on me!"
- A. Or they can just try to stay away from mother so that she can't see the dirt.
  - 1. If mom comes into the living room, the daughter goes into the bedroom.
    - a. She'll try to get in the car before her mother gets in.
- A. Or she can do what she ought to do if she has a mother who reflects the grace of God.
  - 1. She can go to her mother and say, "Look, my dress is dirty."
    - a. And if her mom is right on, she does something to take care of the dirt
  - 2. And she may remind her daughter to be more careful the next time
    - a. But in the end, that daughter will be assured of her mother's love
      - (1) That is forgiveness that leads to reconciliation

II. And that is the primary theme of this last message in a series of sermons

- A. That has tried to get at the question of "Who Are We?" as Christians
  - 1. And who we are as God's people in the Anabaptist/Mennonite faith tradition
- A. We've talked about two core values suggested by Palmer Becker
  - 1. In his recent writing on the subject
- A. First, that Jesus is the center of our faith, our Lord as well as our Savior
  - 1. Second, that Christian community is the center of our lives
- A. And today, we focus on the understanding that reconciliation is the center of our work
  - 1. Reconciliation is what brings us into a relationship with God in the first place
    - a. And it is at the core of what we are about as God's people; it's what we do!
- A. If you want another way of remembering these three key elements of our faith
  - 1. Think of them this way – being a Christian involves
    - a. Believing, belonging, and behaving

- 2. Believing in Jesus Christ as Savior **and** Lord
  - a. Belonging to the church/body of Christ
    - (1) And then, behaving in a new way
- A. We spoke about that last core value already in the first message
  - 1. When we said that faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior not only brings eternal life
    - a. But it changes who we are and how we live in this life as well
  - 2. If it doesn't bring about that change, we'd better check on our relationship
    - a. Do we really believe in Jesus and his teaching
      - (1) And are we truly committed to following his example/his way of life
- A. And one of the more difficult teachings of Jesus, at least it seems that way to me
  - 1. Is getting our heads wrapped around the idea of forgiveness/reconciliation
- A. Even as I read the story that I shared at the beginning of this message
  - 1. I was thinking – But shouldn't that little girl have been disciplined in some way
    - a. For getting her nice new dress dirty the first time she wore it?
      - (1) Did any of you have thoughts similar to that?
- A. I had to think pretty hard about the purpose of discipline
  - 1. Before I could arrive at the conclusion – if she had tried to hide the dirt
    - a. Then yes, discipline would have been in order to help her see
      - (1) That hiding the truth is a form of dishonesty, of lying
  - 2. Or if she had tried to ignore the dirt, pretend that it didn't exist
    - a. Correction would be in order to help her understand the need
      - (1) To deal with the mistakes that we make in life, our sins if you will
    - b. Even when we are afraid of what might happen if we admit our guilt
  - 3. Those are tough lessons to learn, and we all need discipline/correction at times
    - a. In order to overcome our human tendency to cover up our wrongdoing
      - (1) Or to blame our faults and mistakes on somebody else
- A. On the other hand, if the little girl comes to her mother and confesses her wrongdoing
  - 1. Then I believe that following Jesus' teaching and example
    - a. Means that forgiveness is the correct response
  - 2. Yes, there will still be consequences that will need to be dealt with
    - a. The little girl's dress is still dirty, it still has to be cleaned
  - 3. Perhaps she will have to wear a different dress that day, instead of her new one
    - a. At the very least, it will be an inconvenience to her mother

(1) It will take time and energy to deal with the dirty dress

- A. But the mother's offer of forgiveness means that she also takes upon herself
  - 1. A role in dealing with the consequences as well as the original wrongdoing
    - a. The little girl may carry some of the responsibility, but she can't wash the dress
  - 2. All she can really do is to let Mom clean up the dirt, or provide her with a clean dress
    - a. But she will recognize that her mother is doing it because she cares for her
  - 3. And someday, that little girl will be able to respond with grace in a similar way
    - a. When she is hurt or offended by the actions of someone else
- A. That is the goal and the purpose of forgiveness -
  - 1. God's forgiveness of our sin, and our forgiveness of a sister or brother –
    - a. The desired outcome is more than just dealing with the offense
  - 2. The end result of forgiveness offered and accepted is reconciliation
    - a. A restored relationship, and peace of heart, soul and mind – God's peace
- A. It's not as simple as brushing away the offense, as though it didn't matter
  - 1. The sin must be recognized, just as the little girl should be told
    - a. Not to go out and get her dress dirty again
  - 2. And the consequences of the sin still need to be dealt with
    - a. Through restitution, if possible, and certainly with a change in behavior
- A. But true forgiveness means that the offended person also takes on a responsibility
  - 1. First of all, to work at mending the relationship that has been injured
    - a. And then to help deal with the consequences, the "clean up" process
- A. And that may not feel right to us, especially when we are the one
  - 1. Who has been wronged, or hurt, or treated unjustly
- A. But consider the alternatives to forgiveness and reconciliation –
  - 1. If, like many of us, the mother would get angry with the child
    - a. And out of that anger, would simply decide that the girl needs to be punished
  - 2. If the punishment is all the little girl receives, a lesson will have been learned
    - a. But there will be no reconciliation – no peace between mother and child
  - 3. In fact, chances are the next time the girl gets her dress dirty
    - a. She will try even harder to keep her mother from knowing about it
  - 4. And instead of learning about a way to deal with the dirt in a positive way
    - a. The little girl grows up believing that the way to avoid punishment
      - (1) Is to never admit that you've done anything wrong

III. We all know children and maybe even adults who act like that

- A. If we are honest with ourselves this morning, most if not all of us here today
  - 1. Would have to admit that our relationship with God is often more like the little girl
    - a. Who learns to be afraid of punishment
- A. Rather than learning and trusting that when we confess our wrongdoing
  - 1. God stands ready to forgive us, to help take care of the dirt
    - a. God already has prepared clean clothes for us to wear
  - 2. And while there may still be consequences that we will have to live with
    - a. God reminds us not to go and do the same thing again
      - (1) God's Spirit gives us power to change our behavior
  - 3. And God is even willing to help us deal with the consequences of our sin
- A. All that, God is willing and able to do for us because of one reason
  - 1. That is - the great love God has for us, his human creation, his children
- A. And that is the only way for us, whose lives are made dirty with sin
  - 1. To be reconciled to a holy, perfect and righteous God
- A. That is the message I hear in the scripture passage that Matt read for us this morning
  - 1. Jesus, the living, breathing reality of who God is
    - a. Creator and master of everything else that exists
  - 2. Became Savior and Lord of the church, a body made up of all who would believe
    - a. By giving his life on the cross, dying in our place
  - 3. So that we, who are made dirty through the sin that is in our lives
    - a. Can be made clean again
- A. And though God has every right to be angry and punish us for our wrongdoing
  - 1. Instead, God has chosen to forgive us, so that we can be reconciled to him
    - a. Making peace through the blood of Jesus' death on the cross
- A. We may sometimes forget how radical this is, because it all seems so simple
  - 1. William Barclay in his commentary on the Letter to Hebrews writes –
- A. "There is one eternal principle which will be valid as long as the world lasts.
  - 1. The principle is--Forgiveness is a costly thing.
    - a. Human forgiveness is costly. A son or a daughter may go wrong
      - (1) A father or a mother may forgive; but forgiveness has brought tears
        - (a) There was the price of a broken heart to pay.
    - b. Divine forgiveness is costly. God is love, but God is holiness.

2. God, least of all, can break the great moral laws on which the universe is built.
    - a. Sin must have its punishment or the very structure of life disintegrates.
  3. And God alone can pay the terrible price that is necessary before men can be forgiven. Forgiveness is never a case of saying: 'It's all right; it doesn't matter.'
    - a. Forgiveness is the most costly thing in the world." end quote
  4. It is the only way sinful human beings can be reconciled to a perfect God
- A. And in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he adds this line on the subject –
1. All this from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ
    - a. And **given to us** the ministry of reconciliation

IV. The early church had to learn what that reconciliation with God meant

- A. For one, it meant that they, in turn, had to work at reconciliation
1. With strangers and with even enemies
- A. The primary example of that was in the way they found it so hard
1. To believe that Gentile people could become Christians
    - a. Simply by accepting God's grace and forgiveness
      - (1) And not by becoming Jews first, with all the baggage that went with that
  2. It must have seemed as though these non-Jewish folks were getting off way too easy
    - a. After everything the Rabbis taught about the importance of
      - (1) Strict obedience to the Law of Moses
- A. And the church has continued to struggle with that concept –
1. Which comes first, law or grace? Obedience or forgiveness?
- A. The church of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe said – do what the church requires
1. And then you will receive forgiveness and eternal life
- A. The Anabaptist reformers said – God has already made the offer of forgiveness
1. Reconciliation does not depend on our goodness or cleanliness
    - a. Our part is to accept God's plan for salvation, the forgiveness of sin
      - (1) And then, through the power of the Spirit, to live as a forgiven people
  2. Or, as it has sometimes been said – we become Christians when we
    - a. "Surrender as much of ourselves as we can
      - (1) To as much of Christ as we can understand"
- A. That is why we believe that salvation is a one-time experience of forgiveness
1. But also an ongoing process of greater and deeper surrender to Jesus
    - a. As we learn to know him and trust him more and more

- A. And it is in that process of spiritual growth that our lives are changed/transformed
  - 1. So that we become more and more like Jesus
- A. The little girl learns to keep from getting her dress dirty
  - 1. But when it happens, she doesn't hesitate to tell her mother so it can be dealt with
    - a. Because she knows her mother will never stop loving her
      - (1) No matter how many times her dress needs to be cleaned
- A. Accepting Jesus leads to transformed living
  - 1. And then, transformed people "think reconciliation" to use Palmer's words
- V. Our text says that it is God's desire for all things to be reconciled to himself
  - A. And by extension, that suggests that all things must be reconciled to each other as well
    - 1. The concept is the one that is embodied in the Hebrew word "shalom"
  - A. "I am at peace with God and with my fellowmen as far as I know"
    - 1. Is familiar terminology to many older Mennonites
      - a. I grew up in a church where that type of "confession" was a common statement
        - (1) In preparation for sharing in the communion service
  - A. And while we recognize, and Jesus spoke about, the fact that the world in which we live
    - 1. Will never achieve this peace of God in all its perfection
      - a. I believe God's people are called to do everything within our power to live that way
  - A. And that means a number of things, including –
    - 1. We must offer forgiveness to anyone who offends us
  - A. Following the pattern of God's effort to bring reconciliation
    - 1. We dare not withhold our forgiveness based on the willingness of the other person
      - a. To demonstrate repentance or ask our forgiveness
    - 2. While it is true that reconciliation cannot take place until the offense is recognized
      - a. And until our forgiveness is understood and accepted
    - 3. Our part is to forgive, as completely and wholeheartedly as we can
      - a. It means we can never hold a grudge against another
        - (1) No matter what they may have said or done to hurt us
  - A. Jesus made a point of saying that even when a person comes before the altar
    - 1. To present a sacrifice to God, if he remembers that he has offended his brother
      - a. First, go and be reconciled with that brother, then come and make the sacrifice
  - A. For anyone who thinks that our relationship with God is only a personal matter
    - 1. Jesus says, reconciliation comes first, even before worship

- A. Or perhaps we should understand it mean that accepting God's offer of peace
    - 1. And the willingness to do everything we can to live at peace with others
      - a. Is the most important sacrifice/worship we can offer to God
  - A. Sometimes we think of evangelism and peace and justice issues as two separate things
    - 1. But Anabaptist Mennonite belief is that that they go together –
      - a. Reconciliation with God, reconciliation with others
        - (1) Reconciliation with all of creation
  - A. Jesus said we are to ask for God's forgiveness "as we forgive others"
    - 1. God's way of peace means "going the extra mile"
      - a. Going beyond what might seem fair to our human way of thinking
        - (1) To a willingness to follow Jesus even when it hurts
  - A. People whose lives are being transformed by the mighty power of God
    - 1. At work in us through the presence of the Holy Spirit
      - a. Are a people who work for peace and reconciliation
- VI. Let me close with this quote from Mark Twain, who wasn't always known for his Christian attitudes, but who wrote these words - "Forgiveness is the fragrance that the flower leaves on the heel of the one who crushed it."
- A. That is costly forgiveness, but it is the only path toward true reconciliation
    - 1. And it is the path we are called to walk as followers of Jesus
  - A. Anabaptist Christians believe that "Jesus is the center of our faith"
    - 1. "Community is the center of our lives", and "Reconciliation is the center of our work"
  - A. These are values that will change us from the people we would be without Jesus
    - 1. They are values that will set us apart, and make us act differently
      - a. Than the non-believers around us
    - 2. They are values that have stood the test of time down through the years
      - a. And I believe they are just as relevant to us today
  - A. I believe that they are the only way to experience "God's peace"