

Preaching on Reconciliation from a Pastoral Care Perspective

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Introduction

Reconciliation is a fine word for homiletical enterprises! It combines the qualities of being a sophisticated concept with a sound that rolls well off the tongue of a preacher. In addition, it carries a special prestige in one's theological vocabulary. No one (well, almost no one!) is inclined to debate about whether reconciliation is a good and desirable thing. Last, but far from least, it is a word and a quality that can be used in reference to a wide variety of situations and circumstances. A sermon can benefit richly from some of the insights that pastoral care brings to an understanding of reconciliation.

No doubt, you remember (or you should!) from your basic course in pastoral care that reconciliation is one of four basic and recurring expressions, or functions, of pastoral care noted over the history of the Christian church. Interestingly, however, reconciliation was a late addition to the original three functions delineated by Seward Hiltner in his early writing.¹ Clebsch and Jaekl, in their classic book on the history of pastoral care, added reconciliation as an addition to Hiltner's original formulation.²

The Functions of Pastoral Care

To review and to set the place of reconciliation in pastoral care in context, let's take a quick look at the other three functions before focusing more carefully on reconciliation itself. The first expression is *healing* pastoral care, which includes not only the recovery, or restoration, from some malady (physical, psychological, or spiritual), but also a process of growth engendered by going through the experience. The end result of healing, therefore, is a state in which the former sufferer is in fact better off, perhaps physically but certainly spiritually, than he or she was before.

Sustaining pastoral care, the second of the original three, is directed toward those for whom healing is not likely, at least in the physical or psychological sense. Encouragement is the primary expression of this function of pastoral care. It takes the form of assuring presence; the promise that the sufferer will not be left alone; and, further, that reassurance is always available, from both caregiver and the divine. Presence is the hallmark of sustaining pastoral care.

The third function, *guidance*, was always the category that, during my professorial years, gave seminary students hope that the opportunity to "tell people what to do" had arrived! They were wrong, however. Guidance has far more to do with identifying a variety of sources and resources for strength and edification. Guidance is often, though not exclusively, a gentle pointing, often reminding the sufferer of the variety of resources for strength that are available for exploration and incorporation as the process of suffering goes on. In the absence of any memory to be recovered, the sufferer can be led to new sources for strength. Note also that guidance is not always gentle. There are times when more power is appropriately exerted to encourage a "turning around" of the sufferer who has become too immersed in the suffering to be

able to see or, indeed, to hope.

All three of those aspects, you will note, can overlap. A skilled practitioner of pastoral care will not utilize only one of these functions as a time. Such a practice would be far too mechanical and lack the genuineness of relationship that is so essential to a pastoral relationship. Further, please note that these first three functions most often are expressed in a one-to-one relationship between sufferer and “deliverer” of pastoral care. Here is the place at which reconciliation offers an additional reward.

In fact, reconciliation may have been left out of the original list, influenced by the existing prejudice in favor of more private, one-to-one relationships. Reconciliation, as a function of pastoral care, enlarges the realm from care for the *individual* to care for *relationships*. Thereby, reconciliation becomes more than an “appropriate” topic for preaching. It becomes necessary! Reconciliation itself can be accomplished, or at least begun, in the preaching event itself. So, let’s take a step back and talk (or write!) about the components of reconciliation and the contexts within which it can and should be addressed.

Alienation

In the usual understanding of the term, reconciliation, as an end result, presumes that there was once a state of harmony between two or more parties, alienation has occurred, and harmony has been restored. Here lies a never-ending topic for the preacher. Alienation is all too common in our experience. Certainly, conflict can be used as a primary example. Illustrations are abundantly found in virtually any human relationship: from nations, to marriages, to parent-child relationships, to business and voluntary organizations. Even churches are subject to the experience of alienation. But contrary to popular perception, alienation is not always a hostile phenomenon. Alienation can also be used to describe the sensation of familiarity turned to estrangement—a quiet, rather than expressive, experience of no longer feeling at one with someone who has been friend or partner. Alienation can even be experienced within the self—a sense of “not feeling like myself.” Or, as change occurs in the relationships and institutions in one’s life, there can be a sense of changed affiliation, such as, “This doesn’t feel like my church anymore.” Whether experienced explosively or internally, alienation results in a desire to be re-connected, to be returned to a former, and more familiar, condition. In other words, to be reconciled.³

Virtually any understanding of human nature that holds theological water will acknowledge the reality of sin and the propensity toward self-interest. The result of those forces at work within and around us is powerful fodder for alienation. In response to that sense of estrangement and change, temptation, along with a sense of pride, is likely to enter in. The result, all too often, is a stubborn or fearful refusal to attempt to reconstruct, or to build anew, what has been broken. Examples abound in scripture: Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Sarah and Hagar. Those are relationships between human beings, but as already noted, alienation can also occur within the self when hopes and perceptions are not met: Jonah, the rich young ruler, Judas Iscariot.

Scripture is filled with references and examples about the strains, but it is also filled with illustrations of the importance of reconciling formerly harmonious relationships. In some of the examples cited above, harmony and reconciliation did occur.

What about reconciliation? Scripture, again, regularly provides clues. The Psalms of Lament are primary examples, along with the formula offered in Matthew 5:22-24,

which also communicates the urgency with which the need for reconciliation should be understood. From a biblical perspective, it is clear that reconciliation matters!

The Relationship Between Faith and Psychology

Pastoral care, of course, takes the relationship between scripture and psychology very seriously. Scripture provides us with fundamental concepts and principles by which we are invited, if not urged, to live. Psychology provides carefully explored and detailed insight into the functioning of the human psyche and identifies obstacles to living life as we understand. It also identifies resources in the nature of human behavior that can help us to move through or past those obstacles—or at least to identify them more clearly. The following steps are fairly standard in the world of conflict resolution and mediation. Whether explicit or not, they rely upon and reflect an understanding of human nature that resonates with our task as agents of reconciliation.

The content of a “treatment plan” in pastoral care is not that different from the points to be considered in constructing a sermon about reconciliation. In pastoral care, available elements (judiciously chosen, ordered, and applied) include separation and reflection, patience, admission of fault, forgiveness, and discipline. Discipline probably is the overarching concept and practical tool within which the other practices are carried out. After all, if taken seriously, each of the forenamed processes take a lot of grit and determination.

The Process of Reconciliation

The steps of *separation* and *reflection* are combined here, although they clearly are not the same thing. When alienation is experienced, a variety of emotional responses can be experienced: anger, probably; grief, likely; fear, if the previous harmony genuinely mattered, always. We could use more gentle terms, like “irritation” or “disappointment” or “somewhat anxious,” but, again, if the previous harmony was experienced as significant, the change from familiar and dependable to strange and untrustworthy is wrenching. So, let’s acknowledge the deeper dimensions of what has taken place.

In the face of such threat (and alienation is a threat to the well-being of the self and to its significant relationships), the usual first response, though not always observable, is emotional. In the face of intense emotion, our ability to analyze and seek deeper understanding is compromised. Emotion and rationality are both essential to our existence, but they don’t always work well together. The psychological world speaks, in a variety of theoretical frameworks, of the importance of one’s ability to “differentiate” between the rational and the emotive. The ability to do so is a mark of maturity. Frequently, the mature action is to separate, to pull back, in order to get perspective and to avoid saying or doing something that makes the alienation all the more difficult to resolve. Separation, then, is an early move. Its purpose is both protective and strategic—protective of the self and protective of the interest in finding a solution to the problem. To exercise that separation, even when tempted to “get in another word,” is a mature act of strategy. This is particularly true if the separation is explained to the other party, e.g. “I need some time to think about this, because I don’t want things to get any worse.”

Note that the illustrative statement above aims at separation and does so for the purpose of reflection. The reflection has a desired purpose, of course. Reflection can be utilized

to calculate ways in which to do harm to the other party, or parties. In the best of all possible scenarios, reflection is for the sake of the *restoration* of the relationship—reconciliation. The aim of reflection is first to understand oneself (What have I done? Have I offended? What is at stake for me in this?); second, to understand the other party, or parties (What is going on with them? Have I misunderstood something about them? What do they need from me?); and third, to understand the context or nature of the relationship (Have we been unclear with each other? Has something about the fundamental commitments of our relationship changed? Has one of us placed expectations on the relationship that are not fair or appropriate?).⁴

Separation and reflection acknowledge two very essential components of our humanness. Our feelings tell us who we are and what matters. Our rational capacity enables us to articulate our self-understanding more clearly, to understand more deeply why these things matter, and to devise ways to preserve and enhance what matters to us. With that knowledge, we are in a better position to figure out ways to work toward better relationships without either sacrificing the self unduly or failing to give appropriate regard to the other person(s). When alienation has occurred, it is unlikely that reconciliation can or will occur unless some stepping back for the sake of understanding takes place.

Patience is another essential ingredient in the path toward reconciliation. It is important, again, for the sake of understanding, but it is also important for the sake of exercising proper regard for self and the other. We do not recover from hurt and alienation quickly! And neither does the person from whom we are alienated. Trust and trustworthiness often have been undermined. The energy required to repair broken relationships is great. There will be uncertainty about both the possibility of reconciliation and the worth of the effort required. And, frankly, patience implies time. Time is needed for the intensity of the early emotions to subside and to allow for the rational to exercise more influence. Time is needed to find constructive and genuine ways to express the feelings that have been generated by the alienation. Relationships can sustain heavy damage in a short time. Relationships do not repair as rapidly as they break down. Years ago, when serving another congregation, I was witness to a revealing moment in the preschool. Two three-year-old boys had an altercation. I have long forgotten the circumstances. The teacher, anxious for harmony to be restored to the classroom, demanded that the two immediately apologize to each other. The first, with obvious misery and submission to the authority of the teacher, did so with downcast eyes and much nervous wiggling. The second just stood there, with tears streaming down his face. When the teacher, somewhat impatiently, urged him to get on with his apology, he turned to her and sobbed, "I can't want to!" That says it all about the importance of patience. Waiting patiently can be one of the most important elements of finding genuine reconciliation, rather than a formulaic, even manipulative, ritual that carries little significance.

Admission of fault. Now comes one of the hardest parts of a process of reconciliation. This ingredient should be no surprise. After all, in some form or another, in every worship service, there is a time for confession of sin. But, somehow, it's easier in the anonymous experience than in the person-to-person event. Of course, even admission of fault must be exercised judiciously. If making a thoughtful and sincere admission seems to threaten more damage than opportunity for redemptive activity, the admission may be more appropriately made to the self or to a third party than to the aggrieved

person. But on the other hand, it is all too easy to rationalize one's way into admitting fault only to the self and not to the other, when such a step might well be a transforming moment in the relationship. In any case, the admission of fault to self, to God, and, if sensitively exercised, to the other, is crucial.

Forgiveness often is confused with reconciliation. The two are not the same. Forgiveness, as presented here, is another of the steps in the reconciling process. Remember that our understanding of alienation is, in some cases, an experience of barriers or chasms that have cut off formerly harmonious parties from each other. Forgiveness is an attempt to lower the barriers or to bridge the chasm. Further, forgiveness in the divine-human relationship is different from forgiveness in the human-human relationship. The divine encounter is one in which guilt lies only with one party, the human. In the human encounter, it is hard to imagine a circumstance in which one party is entirely guilt-free. Thus, a substantive element in human forgiveness is the recognition of fault in all participants, though the fault, or deficit, differs from one party to the next.⁵

In some cases, of course, these steps do not conclude with reconciliation as we intend it. The breach may be so wide, the harm so extensive, that reunion is not possible. At that point, there may be the necessity for another understanding of reconciliation. When some hope is seen to be impossible, we can say that we have "reconciled" ourselves to the fact that no change will come. The expression is a bit dated now, but it is expressive of this less desirable and sad outcome. "I've reconciled myself to the fact that this marriage cannot be saved." "I've become reconciled to the reality that the cancer is incurable." That sort of reconciliation is not what we want, but at times it is unavoidable.

When that sort of resigned reconciliation seems to be the only possibility, then another type of forgiveness becomes important. It is an understanding of forgiveness that appears in writings of the desert fathers of the fourth century. As described by Roberta Bondi, when the likelihood of restored harmony was not possible, forgiveness still required two necessary ingredients: "not seeking revenge" and "actually and genuinely longing for the welfare of the person who has committed the injury."⁶

Let's be optimistic for a moment. After all, hope is an important element in this whole process as well. Let's presume that the steps of separation, reflection, admission of fault, and forgiveness have been accomplished. Reunion of the formerly alienated parties has taken place. There is rejoicing! Is that enough? Not without the final element of *discipline*. A further perception that faith holds of human nature is that we must not be naïve about reconciling, redemptive, moments. Danger always lurks around the next corner. Without disciplined, joint reflection together on the causes of the alienation and firm commitments to strategies for actively working for the welfare of the relationship, long-term harmony is still in jeopardy. Reconciliation is an ongoing process, not a state or accomplishment to be concluded. Discipline is always necessary if reconciliation is to continue.

Conclusion

It is a safe assumption that sitting in any congregation on a Sunday morning are a number of people who are grieving or fuming over the antagonism or sense of hopelessness that has rendered them asunder. Sometimes alienated parties are sitting right next to each other. More often, one is there and the other(s) are not, because of

the breach that has come about in their formerly harmonious state. Good pastoral care will be attentive to such situations and look for ways in which to make a constructive intervention. Preachers also need to take into account not only the likelihood of ongoing alienation but also the yearning for reconciliation that lies beneath apparent hopelessness and/or hostility—perhaps in the hearts of those who, for all appearances, seem to be hale and hearty.

While this article has addressed itself primarily to alienation and reconciliation between two or more human parties, or within the self, at least three other relationships deserve acknowledgment and some comment. The first of these, of course, is the experience of alienation between a person and God. The assumption here is that the sense of alienation can be experienced by both! Certainly, scripture is filled with examples of God's expressions of felt alienation from us: Noah and the flood, the exile, the mighty words of many of the prophets. And, of course, the life of Christ is the ultimate demonstration of God's willingness to sacrifice Jesus in the interest of overcoming the broken relationship with us. At the same time, scripture and literature throughout the ages provide us with authors who give poignant and angry testimony to the sense of being deserted or cut off from God. On our human side, the steps described above still hold sway. They are steps that are encouraged often in pastoral counseling and spiritual direction. Stepping back, seeking to understand more deeply, admitting our own blocks and refusals to see, confessing our faults, and entering into disciplined relationship/conversation with God are the components of the process for doing our part in seeking a deeper, more reconciled level of intimacy with God. And the preacher can extend an invitation into this process as effectively as any pastoral counselor. In fact, the preacher has the advantage of *not* being eyeball to eyeball with the individual, thus allowing more time for reflection, in response to the preached word, to do its work without the pressure of having to give a more immediate response.

Alienation, of course, is also part of the experience between people and institutions. At the time of this writing, many people are experiencing a sense of alienation with their government and its initiatives toward war with Iraq. What are the appropriate and faithful steps to take during such a time? Without listing the steps again, note that the process is similar in deciding how to respond in a way that is faithful, not to the institution, but to the God who invites us always to pursue reconciliation. What if a harmonious restoration is not accomplished? Then, what is a form of being "reconciled" to that apparent fact that carries integrity and continued hope?

Last, but not least, is the relationship between ourselves and the creation. There are disturbing circumstances in which persons report that they feel out of place in the world. Their experience is one of rejection and estrangement, not just with people but with the world itself and its felt cold savagery. No place "feels like home" to them. In the face of such stories, where there seems to be no way out, the result too often is suicide or retreat into undisciplined, frightened, unprotected seclusion. When we see such situations, might it not be our responsibility to attempt reconciling steps toward them and even on their behalf? Advocacy for the disenfranchised, and those whose limitations, mental or physical, render them fragile and helpless, is a reconciling move to which we are all called.

There are other situations in which people have lived long lives and have now come to the point at which they are clear that life in this world is no longer harmonious. They no longer "belong" here. Their wish is for a dignified and accepted death. Yet,

all too often, out of arrogance or the inability to “release” them, and the support of modern medicine, we desperately hold on. They are reconciled, it seems, and their reconciliation with death and eternal life seems harmonious. But, we may not be. Could our unwillingness to be “reconciled” to that fact create, rather than overcome, alienation—and result in extended and needless suffering for them?

Is our irresponsible treatment of the environment evidence of alienation between humans and the creation? Has modernity, even post-modernity, led to our becoming so preoccupied with ourselves and our intellectual achievements that we are out of step with the creation itself? The result of alienation often ripples far beyond the original parties. And so, wars and rumors of wars begin to abound—threatening further destruction of the environment, its resources, and the people who dwell in and on it. Reconciliation is indeed a fine word for homiletical, as well as pastoral, enterprises. There is no shortage of situations that stand in need of restoration to the harmony intended for creation. Our creation in the divine image offers promise that, in spite of our finitude and our propensity to sin, there is goodness within us waiting to be called out by the voice of grace and truth. With good motivation, skilled pastoral care, and inspired preaching, who knows what may be possible?

Notes

¹ Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979). First published in 1958.

² W. A. Clebsch and C. R. Jaekl, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1994). First published in 1964 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.).

³ For a concise and helpful discussion of alienation, see “Alienation/Estrangement” in Rodney J. Hunter, ed. *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 22.

⁴ I first became aware of these three questions, as a simple framework for exploring communication failures, in a workshop with Virginia Satir, a family therapist, now deceased, who discusses this in her book, *Peoplemaking* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Science and Behavior Books, 1972).

⁵ For a more extensive and valuable exploration of this understanding of forgiveness, see John Patton’s book, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985).

⁶ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray and To Love* (Fortress Press, 1991), 113-114.