

March 30, 2025

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Psalm 32: 1-5, 10-11; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Faith In the Wilderness: The Mystery and Ministry of Reconciliation

We continue our Lenten journey of nurturing our faith in the wilderness times of our lives. We have been in the wilderness of loneliness needing to find connection and we have been in the wilderness of illness seeking healing which restores us to community. This morning we remain in the wilderness of separation – separation from God and each because of our human and sinful nature. It is in this wilderness that we receive the gift of grace becoming a new creation in Christ.

Unlike the past few weeks where we have heard a narrative story, our scripture this morning is a teaching from the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth. The reading comes from the second letter to the church in Corinth. Paul's authority has been challenged and much of this letter is Paul defending himself against criticisms leveled at him and his ministry. Paul reassures the people of his love for them and that he is a servant of Christ – an ambassador for Christ. It is through Christ that we receive forgiveness and that we forgive others. And through this reconciliation we become a new creation. Hear now these words from 2 Corinthians chapter 5 from the Common English Bible translation:

So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him now. 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. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation.

So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

There are some books you read that just stay with you... *One Good Mama Bone* chronicles Sarah Creamer's quest to find her "mama bone," after she – dirt-poor with no family in rural 1950's South Carolina - is left to care for a boy who is not her own, but instead is the product of an affair between her husband and her best friend and neighbor whom she calls "Sister." It is a profound act of betrayal, an act she must put aside when Sister dies after giving birth to the boy and her husband loses his job and drinks himself to death. The mending and sewing

Sarah does for townsfolk is not enough to pay the bills and she has few prospects for stable income. The biggest challenge, however, for Sarah is the echo of her mother's words – a prophesy seared in her memory since she was a child, "You ain't got one good mama bone in you, girl." How Sarah overcomes this voice in her head that tells her she is not good enough, not the right stock, not able to raise this child Emerson Bridge as her son is a remarkable tale with a mama cow – whom she names Mama Red – at the center of the transformation. At the center of reconciliation. Mama Red becomes the vehicle for Sarah to claim her identity as a mother – to find that mama bone – and raise a child, that while not biologically hers, truly becomes her son. It is a powerful story about how transformation can happen even on those others have deemed as not deserving. You ain't got one good mama bone in you, girl."¹

As I sat with our scriptures for this morning throughout this past week, this book *One Good Mama Bone* kept popping into my mind. Maybe it was the psalmist's use of "worn out bones" to describe how they felt when they kept sin bottled up inside them. You heard Siri read "When I kept quiet, my bones wore out; I was groaning all day long—every day, every night!—because your hand was heavy upon me." The psalmist reveals that holding their sin inside sapped their energy as if in a summer drought. My bones wore out. "You ain't got one good mama bone in you, girl" the protagonist in the book I mentioned is told.

The psalmist tells us that they were physically depleted by the sin they were holding. They were living in the wilderness of sin and separation. And yet that is not the end of the story. They admitted their sin to God – they didn't conceal their guilt. "I'll confess my sins to the Lord," is what the psalmist said. And God removed the guilt of their sin. They trusted God, had faith in God and God responded with forgiveness. The psalm concludes with words of reassurance: "faithful love surrounds the one who trusts the Lord. You who are righteous, rejoice in the Lord and be glad! All you whose hearts are right, sing out in joy!"

The wilderness of sin tells us that we can live our lives without reference to God. That we can ignore the commands to love God and love our neighbor – in all of what that means. To think that we know more about how to be than God does. To think that the lessons Jesus taught us, the invitation Jesus offered, the sacrificial love Jesus are not at the heart of our faith. That was situation in Corinth that Paul found himself in. The people were arguing about Paul's ministry – his authority. They accused him of being inconsistent, cunning, underhanded and that he doesn't really care about the Corinthians. And to add insult to injury they claimed he is not a very good speaker and that there "super-apostles" that visited the church in Corinth who were much better than Paul. So there.

Paul responds with a vigorous defense of his ministry – he was a master of Greco-Roman rhetoric. And most of his argument is a defense not of himself, but of the ministry of Jesus Christ. He, Paul, is the vehicle by which the message of the gift of grace and salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus has been passed on to the Corinthians. Paul talks a lot

¹ Sarah Creamer. *One Good Mama Bone*. University of South Carolina Press; 2017.

about forgiveness in this letter. He is able to forgive the people of Corinth because he is forgiven through Christ for his own sins. Forgiveness is a gift from God that sets us free to become new persons in Christ. It allows reconciliation and healing to occur.

What does this process of forgiveness - of faith in the wilderness of sin - look like? Each week during our prayers of confession - we honestly acknowledge our sin and receive an assurance that we are forgiven. We confess and ask for forgiveness. We profess our faith and confidence in God as we sing our response "we are forgiven, thanks be to God." When we share the passing of the peace, we acknowledge we are called to live as a forgiven people by sharing the peace of forgiveness with each other.

Why do we repeat this week after week? Because it is hard for us to believe what seems like such as a simple statement – that we are forgiven. That we are forgiven. That through Jesus Christ's death on the cross, we are dead to sin. As the Apostle Paul says, we no longer have to live in the wilderness of sin. We can choose to live in the garden of grace. Through the act of repentance, we turn away from our sin and we turn toward God. We become a new creation.

In the Reformed tradition, we have John Calvin to thank for deepening our understanding of repentance. Repentance has two faces for Calvin – death of a corrupt sinful nature and new life in the Spirit of God. They are a consequence of faith and conferred on us by Christ and the Holy Spirit is the author. Calvin defines repentance as "departing from ourselves, we turn to God, and having taken off our former mind, we put on a new..."². For Calvin both knowledge and grace are required. Repentance requires knowledge of the law, the law that we love God and love neighbor. And repentance requires knowledge of our redemption through Christ. It is a both/and. The law shows us our sinfulness that must die off and we receive grace through Christ's merit, not by our own.

Repentance is the conversion by which our old sinful self dies off and a new life arises. We are re-formed. Re-forming – always being reformed into a nature that is arching forward toward the image of God, as theologian Kathryn Tanner describes. In her book *Christ the Key*, Tanner posits "What is of interest about human nature is its plasticity, its susceptibility to being shaped or molded by outside influences generally.... Humans seem to have an exaggerated capacity for this that opens them to a radical reformation from without in the divine image. ... Because humans are like soft wax, we have reflexive capacities of self-formation (which) means humans can try to reshape in a self-critical fashion even desires they cannot help having by nature."³ The changeable nature of humans allows us to be transformed through repentance. Via attachment to God, we become reworked beings because plasticity is part of our human nature. We are no longer fighting for survival in the wilderness of sin.

² John Calvin.. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. John T. McNeill. 2 Vols. *Library of Christian Classics*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1960. I.XIII.14,138 and III.III.1,592, III.iii.5,597

³ Kathryn Tanner. *Christ the Key*, Cambridge University Press, 2009; p 40-46.

“Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?” That is one of the ordination and installation questions we will ask our incoming officers a bit later in the service.

It is a big and serious question – not that the others aren’t also. Of the three requests made, it is the last one that asks for the most heavy lifting from my perspective. Will you work for the reconciliation of the world? Our ability to answer “yes” to that question is intimately tied to the other parts of the question – will you seek to follow Jesus and will you love your neighbors? Reconciliation is the act by which we end of the separation between us as a people caused by sin – separation between individuals, between ideological factions, between nations. It is also the act by which we end of the separation between God and humanity. We are united and re-united with God and with each other.

As we look around the wilderness of our existence today, this task can seem impossible , unsurmountable– a chasm just too deep and wide. We live in a world that is broken, with bodies that decay, with relationships that splinter, and with reminders of how sin separates us from God and each other. We look around our world and in community and sometimes in our own lives and see the chaos. There is just too much pain and grief; too much ugliness and hatred, too much bigotry and prejudice, too much selfishness and zero sum game thinking. Just too much sin. That is the message we hear in the media. There are just too many divisions – too many things that make “us” us and “them” them.

And the Apostle Paul tells the church in Corinth and us: “All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people’s sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation.”

We have been trusted with the message of reconciliation. And that message can sustain us when we are in the wilderness of separation and sin. It can sustain us when we are foraging for forgiveness, grace, and reconciliation in the wilderness. This wilderness, like the other types of wilderness places we inhabit, challenges us to maintain our faith and trust in God. And yet, this is where the Holy Spirit, does some of her best work, as we experience the mystery that is reconciliation. It is a story we need to proclaim. It is a story we need to share. It is a universal and collective story, made up from our individual stories of moments of unmerited forgiveness and grace - from those we walk this earthly ground with and from the one who knew no sin and took on flesh to walk this world with us.

The biblical story from creation to revelation is future-oriented: God will complete what God began. For us, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are signs and guarantees of God’s promise. They are assurances that God remains faithful to God’s redemptive purpose and plan of reconciliation. May it be so.