

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

God's Nuclear Reconciliation

The Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C

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The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar

St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Richmond VA

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. **17** Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! **18** All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: **19** that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. **20** We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. **21** God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

In Our New Testament reading last Sunday, Paul wrote the Christians in Corinth about temptation. I pointed out that we don't think or talk much about temptation these days. So I talked about it, and I guess we all thought about it this week. This week's reading is from Paul's second letter to these same Christians, but his subject here is something we hear a lot about in The Episcopal Church: reconciliation. "Reconciliation" is usually understood today as settling differences between people. We talk about reconciliation between warring peoples, or racial reconciliation, or reconciliation among family members, or among church members. All these are certainly part of reconciliation, but reconciling differences

between people is not what Paul is talking about here. He's talking about people being reconciled to God.

Reconciliation between two people often takes both parties negotiating so they both give a little and meet one another half way. But reconciliation with God only goes in one direction. We have to be reconciled to God. There's no negotiation. We must surrender unconditionally, on his terms.

I'll say more about that in a minute. First, let's look at how God has gone about reconciling the human race to himself. It's so radical that it's unthinkable from a human point of view. God has used what we might call "the nuclear option". During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the West spent obscene amounts of money increasing the power and the number of their nuclear weapons. The idea was that if each side knew the other could completely annihilate them, then neither side would strike the other. The attack that would destroy your enemy would trigger an attack from your enemy that would inevitably destroy you. This was called nuclear deterrence through the threat of "Mutually Assured Destruction," which was abbreviated M.A.D., and it really was.

But it had a perverse logic. No rational government would ever decide to wipe out its enemy by wiping out its own people in the process. The very real danger of Mutually Assured Destruction, as M.A.D. as it sounds, worked. Neither the West nor the Soviet Union ever used the nuclear option during the Cold War, though we came close in the Cuban missile Crisis in 1962. Mutually Assured Destruction made using the nuclear option unthinkable from a human point of view, and I'm sure we're all glad that it did. Of course, there never was any real reconciliation between the Soviet Union and the West. During the Cold War, it was "peaceful coexistence", and though the nuclear threat is no longer the issue it was, today we're only allies out of convenience, and on a limited basis. We're not enemies any more, but we're not really friends.

The reconciliation God accomplished with the human race is completely different. God's reconciliation of human beings to himself means bringing his mortal enemies into complete accord with himself. Scripture teaches us that because of our sin, without Christ, human beings are God's enemies. In his letter to the church at Colosse Paul reminds the Christians there what God did for them in Christ: **"Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation."**
(Colossians 1:21-22)

Our sinful nature causes our “evil behavior”, our sins. From God’s point of view, this is an unacceptable corruption of his own image of holiness and love that he has stamped on us. And because we are the high point of his whole creation, we have spread our self-corruption through our sinful nature and behavior to the natural world. The creation has become corrupted and deranged, where earthquakes tsunamis and epidemics ruin whole continents. Without Christ, human beings are guilty of ruining themselves and everything else.

But in Christ, God has reconciled us in one stroke by doing what from our point of view is unthinkable. This is what Paul is getting at when he says he regards no one, including Christ, “**from a worldly point of view**”. Christ is not just a religious leader, not just a prophet, not just an inspired teacher or a savior. He is God, who brought the universe into being. He is perfectly pure, holy and righteous, having created us and the universe to shine out with his perfection. When he became a human being, Jesus, he lived in perfect, undisturbed communion with God the Father, and obeyed him absolutely and completely.

And the goal of his obedience was unthinkable from the human point of view. Paul expresses it in verse 21: “**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**” In Christ, God became not just part of his own deranged creation, not just a human being marred and defaced by sin, but sin itself: the devilish hostility against God that makes human beings unacceptable to God and in constant rebellion against him. In Christ, God took that loathsome thing that is completely hostile to his own nature, **as himself**. As Jesus hung on the cross, God in his wisdom took everything in our human nature that alienates us from himself, everything that’s contemptible and opposed to God, and infused it into Jesus. And then Jesus took sin into death forever. God annihilated his enemies by taking them to their deaths in Christ on the cross. That’s why Paul’s words “**in Christ**” are so important here: “**if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!**” When we put our faith in Christ, we are “**in Christ**”. “In Christ”, when Christ died on the cross, so did we and so did our sin. “In Christ”, God exercised the nuclear option. He sacrificed his own life to annihilate his enemies in his own death.

But “in Christ” we are also re-created. The old creation, deteriorating under its hopeless sin and malfunction, has passed away! All the misery from the persistent injustice and oppression and wrong the human race has practiced has been relegated to oblivion. God then made good on his absolute guarantee of the new creation by raising Jesus from the tomb. The sin of the human race spread humanity’s decrepitude to the whole creation. But in the cross, God annihilated it, and rolled out the New Adam bursting with unending life, to spearhead his new creation. Because of God’s nuclear option, the die is cast: misery, injustice and

oppression will inevitably be replaced by God's own righteousness and joy and peace. **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”**

No wonder Paul pleads with the Corinthians and with us: **“We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.”** How do we do that, if as he says, **“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.”**? If God has done all the reconciling, what is there for us to do? Think about it in terms of having an operation in the hospital. A doctor doesn't instruct his patient, “be operated on”. A patient can't operate on himself or herself. It's the surgeon who does the operation. But as patients, we put ourselves in the position to be operated on. We allow our medical condition to be evaluated by people who have the right to evaluate it. We accept their diagnosis of whatever the problem may be that needs to be corrected by surgery.

In the same way, we have to put ourselves in the situation to **“Be reconciled to God.”** We must accept that without Christ we're God's enemies. Without Christ, we're hopelessly alienated from him, and candidates for annihilation. We have to surrender unconditionally. But it also means running to Christ, in whom God has exercised the nuclear option and wiped out our sins and guaranteed our place in the world to come.

Jesus has performed the ultimate ministry for us by reconciling us to God through his death and resurrection. He has given us that same ministry of reconciliation and the message of reconciliation to proclaim to all those who are still at war with God. We have great news! It's the best news ever! The war's over! You can stop fighting! God has made permanent peace. He has reconciled us to himself and given us the amazing and wonderful gift of his own life and peace forever. How can we not share this great news with the world?

Let us pray.

Almighty God, who hast sent thine only Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near; plant deep in our hearts thine own love for those who know not thy reconciling love and grace in Christ's gift of himself on their behalf, and give us grace to testify to his having reconciled us to himself at the infinite cost of himself, that they may share with us in thy eternal kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*