

**2 Corinthians 5:17-21**

Hope Mennonite Church

January 10, 2021

Reconciliation Week #1

### **Reconciliation and the Lesson of the Sweet Potato**

About 20 years ago, Palmer Becker coined this one-sentence summary of Anabaptist Christianity: **Jesus** is the center of **our faith**, **community** is the center of **our life**, and **reconciliation** is the center of **our work**.

This year, on January 20, history will repeat itself. Joseph Biden will be sworn in as the third president in a row to assume leadership of an America that is **deeply divided**.

So, not only is **reconciliation** at the **center** of who **we** are as followers of Jesus. There's also nothing more **central** to the needs of our country right now than **reconciliation**.

**[Scott: Screen on here for still shot.]**

Now some of you know I grow sweet potatoes. Here are two of them. One of them you could find in almost any grocery store. The other, you'd **never** find in **any** grocery store. Do you know why? Of course, you do!

**[Scott: Screen off here]**

Not only with fruits and vegetables, but in many ways, we've been **conditioned** to value **sameness**, and to **fear difference**. As Michael McRay says in his book, *I Am Not Your Enemy*, we **fear** people who don't look like us, talk like us, think like us, vote like us, or live near us. And here's a funny thing about **fear**—it controls **everybody's** life—even those who have the upper hand.

Remember how **King** Herod was frightened by a **baby** born in Bethlehem? Today, many Israelis have realized that **the wall**, built for **security**, actually makes them **more** afraid. Many Americans have discovered that more guns poured into society for **security** actually makes them **more** afraid. **Fear controls everybody.**

**Reconciliation**, that is, bringing people back together, assumes a situation where there has been some **difference** and that **difference** has been used to create **division**. The **misuse** of

**difference** has caused ***relationship damage***. The particular ***relationship damage*** could be anything from physical harm to injustice. **Reconciliation** assumes the **misuse** of **difference**.

International peacebuilder John Paul Lederach reminds us that it's **perfectly normal** to **have differences** with other people ... **perfectly** normal. The **problems** come when we are **separated** from each other, and don't **relate** to each other. When we are **separated**, **the other** becomes an **unknown**, and that's when **differences** become **suspicious**. And **suspicious differences** feel ***threatening***, and ***perceived threat*** can lead us to respond to **the other** with anything from stereotyping to violence.

A number of times Lederach has been invited to conflict zones to help bring about a **ceasefire**. Well, a **ceasefire** can be extremely important in the near run. Yet it does nothing to generate **relatedness**—where **differences** become **familiar** and **negotiating differences** becomes the **normal, on-going** work of good human community. For this reason, Lederach encourages groups who are overcoming conflict to create what he calls **platforms**. He means venues for **on-going** conversation, where members of a community meet and talk about **differences**, not just when there's a crisis, but on a **regular** basis, and work together for constructive change.

Making **on-going** conversation a ***priority*** for a community is challenging for westerners like us. In the west, we have **private** lives ... and relationships tend to be a **means** to an end rather than the **end in-itself**. Our predisposition is that **meetings** are for accomplishing ***tasks***. But in **healthy sustainable community**, the purpose for meeting is **to meet**, because the most important thing of all is **staying connected** ... by it we tap **the preventative power of relationships**.

Of course, talking and relating across **differences**, isn't easy, is it? This year I've talked to a lot of you about deep political **differences within** your closest relationships. It's stressful, it's tough to manage ... and you get a sore tongue from biting it so much! It's tough: The price of ***honesty*** can be ***hurt feelings***. On the other hand, the price of ***silence*** can be ***superficiality***. So, it's not easy.

I encourage you to hang in there and offer you **two models** to help.

The first model is from our text today. **2 Corinthians** says our **normal, regular, on-going** work as followers of Jesus is to be talking and acting across barriers of **difference**. And because of that, Paul gives us a very specific and very striking title: We are **ambassadors**. And notice, it's **not** a specially selected or trained **few** of us, but **all** of us who are **ambassadors**.

Well, what is an **ambassador**? An **ambassador's** whole existence is about **difference**: Being **from** a different place, **relocating to** a different place, representing **different** groups of people to each other, and helping them understand each other, find common ground, and negotiating compromises and win-wins ... **all** out of **difference**. **Difference** is an **ambassador's** middle name. Paul says that's who **we** are! **Our** whole existence is about negotiating **difference**.

So, let's take that very seriously. When we are with people who are **different** from us, maybe even **aggravatingly different** from us, let's very consciously put on our **ambassador** hat. Let's engage that role as a **negotiator** of **difference**. Let's very consciously offer the **ambassador's** gift: To prioritize **understanding** over **agreement** ... because **relationship** is more important than **uniformity**. That's model #1: **Ambassador**.

Let me commend to you a second model, a second "**hat**" you can put on ... another role that can help us, especially in those most **aggravating** situations of **difference**, where there can be lots of **emotion**. This role doesn't come specifically from our text. When you encounter political or other views that ruffle your feathers, instead of going into **debater** mode, become an **anthropologist**. That is, become a curious **observer** of other human beings, rather than a **contender** for your position. Say to the other, "I'm **curious** about that. Can you tell me more?" Give to your conversation the **anthropologist's** gift: To prioritize **curiosity** over **opinion** ... because **relationship** is more important than **uniformity**. That's model #2: **Anthropologist**.

Our Conference Minister Heidi Regier Kreider writes these words to us: “On Wednesday, our nation was shocked and horrified as a mob incited by president Trump breached the Capitol building to disrupt election certification by the US congress. The ensuing chaos and violence exposed once again the destructive narratives, white supremacy, and bitter divisions that grip our country.” Our faith in Jesus Christ inspires us to embrace and extend his alternative vision of peace and reconciliation to the communities around us.

“Let us lament the fears and falsehoods that lead to violence. Let us pray for victims of systemic oppression and racism, for perpetrators of hatred, and for national and local leaders during this difficult time. Let us confess our own fears and anger, as well as our own complicity in the sins we deplore. Let us draw mercy and strength from God, to discern what new things God is doing in the world, and to participate in God’s work of reconciling all things to himself.”

And there are good things happening.

I want to make you aware of just two inspiring websites. First, log on to the MCUSA website and specifically #BringthePeace. You’ll find stories of people who are living out Jesus’ alternative vision right now.

The second website is called ReconciliAsian. There are stories of Christians in the Korean peninsula as well as Korean immigrants in the US who are living out Jesus’ alternative vision of peace and reconciliation.

There are good things happening!

Oh ... and one last thing ...

***[Scott: Start Video here to conclusion. That’s the end of the message. Thanks.]***