



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. George H. McConnel  
June 9, 2019 Sermon

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## The Food Channel

Scripture Lessons: 2 Corinthians 5:17-20

There's no fight like a church fight. If you have ever been part of one, you know what I mean. It can be brutal. In the 220 year history of this congregation, we've had a couple of church fights. Some of you lived through one, after Dr. Schram retired. But, believe it or not, that paled in comparison to the church fight we had in the first half of the 19th century.

The first historical record of *that* fight, according to Jim Eschbach who wrote about it in our 200th History, occurred in the 1830's. Unrest over the issue of slavery and the underground railroad was beginning to foment in Dayton and the church was not exempt from those disagreements. The Session minutes show that in August of 1835 Elder Mathew Payton submitted a letter of resignation to the Session asking that his membership be transferred to the Episcopal Church because of his personal disagreement with "schools of thought" followed by our church.

We can relate to that. Members - even Elders - leave churches for all kinds of reasons. In my life time these have included issues like women in church leadership, disagreements over church building programs, the Viet Nam War, Angela Davis, the abortion dilemma, personal opinions of particular ministers, differences in biblical interpretation, controversies over sexual orientation - all kinds of things. We Presbyterians are a feisty crew.

By 1838, three years after Elder Payton resigned, the disagreement over slavery had become so intense that almost half the congregation split from First Presbyterian Church to form Third Street Presbyterian just a block away. The only apparent issue in the split was the dissenters anti-slavery position, while the mother church allied with a more conservative approach. I don't know about you, but I find it hard to imagine a controversy so intense that it would split our beloved church in two, but it did. Those were divisive times, which of course in 1861 culminated with the War Between the States.

The good news is that three generations after splitting into two churches, First Presbyterian Church and Third Street Presbyterian Church - their differences long ago forgotten - reconciled and became Westminster. It is the 100th anniversary of that magnificent reconciliation that we celebrate this morning. If it is unusual for individual churches to split over differences of opinion, it is even more rare to see them reconcile! I'm not aware of a single congregation on our denomination that followed that path.

In today's scripture passage, the Apostle Paul writes that God through Christ reconciled the world to himself and gave **us** the ministry of reconciliation.

In accounting, reconciliation is the process of ensuring that two sets of records are in agreement. Reconciliation is used to ensure that the money leaving an account matches the actual money spent. This is done by making sure the balances match at the end of a particular accounting period. Reconciliation in theological terms holds a similar meaning.

In today's text from Second Corinthians reconciliation is the metaphor for God's saving act. For Paul it is always God who initiates reconciliation. We come close to what Paul is saying when we recall those human situations in which two people disagree, but one, though annoyed by the other, refuses to retaliate and seeks by word and action to win the other over. It happens sometimes when the child of a first marriage resents the new marriage partner, but the new spouse seeks to gain the child with loving concern. So God seeks to win us, and she shows her loving concern in the life and death of her Son.

In our passage, it is **not** God who is reconciled, but the world. Paul pictures estranged, alienated parties brought together again in a restoration of personal relationships. The reconciliation was accomplished by God in the Christ event. Paul's point is that what was accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ was an act of God. God is the actor. The saving act was a two-party action involving God and the world, **not** a three-party transaction in which Christ reconciled an angry God with a sinful world.

Paul goes on to picture the role of the church in the world as being Christ's representatives for a ministry of reconciliation. We celebrate today because First Pres and Third Street Pres, 100 years ago, took seriously the ministry of reconciliation and lived it out between themselves. They sold two very substantial buildings and built an even more important one. But, their vision of reconciliation went further than just uniting two previously split congregations. It included founding a choir college that was part of this new edifice as well. That college proved so effective that it soon outgrew this building and eventually settled in Princeton, New Jersey at its own beautiful campus.

The last time Westminster Choir College returned to visit us here in Dayton with a group of students that had just sung with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, the Dean stood right here and told us that on any given Sunday around the world over one million people enjoy the musical leadership of a Westminster Choir College graduate. Think of that for a moment, over a million people every Sunday. Such are the fruits of a spectacular reconciliation.

To what ministry of reconciliation is God calling this church today?

Three weeks ago, I took Alice's car in to the Hyundai dealership to have some work done on the tires. It was only supposed to take about 45 minutes, so I decided to wait. In the waiting room I was surprised to see the Food Channel on the television. No one was seeming to pay attention to it, and I wasn't much interested in learning how to cook asparagus on the grill. So, I went to the front desk and asked if we might change the channel. "I'm sorry," said the attendant. "The boss says, that's the only channel now. He's taken away the clicker. You see," he continued, lowering his voice, "We used to have it set at one of those cable news stations, but the customers would argue loudly with each other. I mean really shout it out. The final straw was when two of them were threatening to hit one another and three of us had to step in to stop the fight."

Clearly, we live in divisive times. We read different books, watch different news on television, listen to different radio stations and subscribe to different pod casts. We shout at each other while waiting for our cars to be fixed. We seem to see the world with different glasses. Some pundits say that we Americans live in the most divisive era since those tumultuous years in the mid-1800's when this church divided. And just as they were in those days, the divisions in our culture are played out in the church. What an opportunity for a ministry of reconciliation!

Craig Barnes, the President of Princeton Theological Seminary, recently remarked that one of the hardest vocations in America these days is to be a Preacher in a "purple" congregation.

I hope you had a chance to see some of the D-Day 75th anniversary celebrations last Thursday. Once again I was moved by the veterans from that fateful day and by the memory of the 2,501 young American soldiers who died securing the beachheads. What I was surprised to learn - no I was shocked - to read in the Washington Post that more Americans were shot to death by March 6th of this year than died on D-Day. There are 35 gun deaths **a year** in Great Britain - about half the number of an average **day** in the United States. Our friends and neighbors are dying for a ministry of reconciliation.

Not to long ago, I saw a quote from an immigrant, Lesley Goldwasser, who came to America from Zimbabwe in the 1980s. Surveying our political scene a few years ago, Lesley said, "You Americans kick around your country like it's a football. But it's not a football. It's a Fabergé egg. You can break it."

As humans who evolved over centuries, we are driven by brains that encourage us to put ourselves first. When we are threatened in any way, we fear and fear leads to anger and anger leads to hate. We lash out violently. If not physically, then we lash out verbally or we run away or we send a tweet. These instincts are deep inside us. Instincts that were once necessary for our survival, but which don't serve us so well in relating to others in the twenty-first century.

For our world in 2019 is a profoundly connected world - electronically connected, economically con-

nected, politically connected. What happens in Iran or Kenya today is likely to have repercussions in London or Washington tomorrow. What happens on the stock exchange in Tokyo will effect markets in New York in seconds. And yet, our morals have not always caught up with the new technological reality.

Friends, ***in a world in which individuals and small groups will increasingly have powers of destruction hitherto confined to the nation-state***, it has become imperative for the church to become a ministry of reconciliation. ***If our religious and ethical traditions fail to address this challenge, they will fail the test of our time.***

In commenting on the political polarity in America today, this year's keynote speaker for The Westminster Lecture on Faith and Civic Life, Jim Wallis, wrote about the ministry of reconciliation and our current cultural divide: *Neither the left nor the right has the answers now, though both will continue to say that it does. So we (the faith community) have to focus on the spiritual and moral values **that bring us together**; that choose the common good over private gain, inclusiveness over intolerance, civility over shouting, long term over short term, integrity over celebrity, justice over excuses, morality over expediency, stewardship over consumption, truth over spin, patient persistence over immediate results, compassion over fear.*

Well, that's a tall agenda. Just how far should we go in practicing a ministry of reconciliation? ***Perhaps the distance grace covers on the cross.***