

Text: Ephesians 2: 11-22

Title: Reconciled

Date: 07.19.09

Roger Allen Nelson

In “Gran Torino” Clint Eastwood plays Walt Kowalski: a cantankerous, beer swillin’, tobacco chewin’, retired autoworker. He is a Korean War veteran and a gnarly old curmudgeon. He is angry at a changing neighborhood and a changing world. The movie opens at the funeral for Walt’s wife with a freshly scrubbed priest blabbering on about God and the meaning of the life. At the funeral luncheon, the earnest priest tells Walt that he promised his dying wife that he would look after her and communicate her desire that he go to confession. To which Walt hisses:

Well, I confess that I never really cared for church very much and the only reason that I went was because of her. And I confess that I have no desire to confess to a boy that is just out of the seminary.

Later when the priest presses, Walt snarls:

I don’t know what you’re peddling padre... I think you are an over educated 27 year old virgin who likes to hold the hands of old ladies who are superstitious and promise them eternity.

And, with that Walt walks away.

My guess is that Walt voices an all too common assessment of church and faith. Religion is irrelevant ~ relegated to something for little old ladies and naïve young men. Church is a place for niceties ~ a boring relic that offers the frightened, the uptight, and the weak the quaint hope of an eternal fairy land. Faith is little more than muddled musings about things vague and ethereal ~ and it has little to do with the rough and tumble real world of power, politics, money, and sex.

Now, I may sound a bit like a defensive padre, but that is a far cry from what Paul proclaims about Jesus. If Walt Kowalski is right then we are those who are to be most pitied, but if Paul is right, then we sitting with something that is earth shaking. If Walt is right then we are little more than a liturgical country club, but if Paul is right then we have a window into a radical reconfiguration of reality.

Paul writes (in our text this morning) that the purpose of God in Christ was to create in himself one new humanity. And, the word that Paul uses to describe this action, *katallasso*, is significant. We translate it as reconciliation, but it is not just two opposing parties making up. In Greek it has the sense of a thorough change, or a complete exchange of one thing for another.

In this text:

separation for unity,

hostility for peace,
alienation for belonging,
exclusion for inclusion,
farness for nearness,
two for one.

Maybe the best description of *katallasso* is found in the fourth and fifth verses of this chapter in Ephesians.

Because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we dead in transgression...

The exchange: death for life.

That is to say, that God in Christ has changed everything. There is a new humanity.

Dear friends, you are chosen by God in Christ. (Last week)

You are reconciled to God by Christ. (This week)

You are chosen. You are reconciled.

Paul's working cosmology ~ the way things are ~ is that creation is infected, or under the curse of sin. And, sin separates us from God and from each other. To quote Frederick Buechner:

The power of sin is centrifugal. When at work in a human life, it tends to push everything out toward the periphery. Bits and pieces fly off until only the core is left. Eventually bits and pieces of the core itself go flying off until in the end nothing at all is left. "The wages of sin is death" is St. Paul's way of saying the same thing.

In "Gran Torino" Walt Kowalski is alienated from his children, he is tortured by the memories of what he did in Korea, and he spits out foulmouthed racist bile. The movie revolves around his relationship with Cambodian immigrants who move in next door. It is a poor neighborhood where the gangs now rule the weak through fear and intimidation. They are all trapped in a spiral of violence, rape, and retaliation. Walt sees his world coming apart at the seams. The movie is finally a meditation on how the centrifugal power of sin separates and ultimately destroys community, culture, and self.

And, we all have our own stories of that reality. We all know how relationships, vocation, self, culture, and community finally come apart at the seams when greed, lust, revenge, sloth, adultery, idolatry, selfishness, and pride, etc, wedge their way in. We all have our own stories of how the wages of sin get paid.

As an aside:

I am learning again and again, seven years in, that this calling often offers a front row seat for the centrifuge. And, the hardest thing is not judgment. I have a full plate of my own darkness and demons ~ and quite frankly judgment doesn't come

easily for me. The hardest part is the pain of watching the bits and pieces flying off. You come to hate sin for the separation and death that it ultimately inflicts. And trust me, that's not holding the hands of old ladies and promising eternity, but that has to do with the rough and tumble real world of power and politics and money and sex.

But! But, if Walt Kowalski is wrong and Paul is right then we've been reconciled with God by Christ. If Walt Kowalski is wrong and Paul is right then the centrifugal force of sin has no ultimate power. If Walt is wrong and Paul is right then there is a new humanity and there is nothing that we can do to add or subtract from that reality. Because, that exchange of death for life isn't a matter

of our obedience,

or our ethnicity,

or our efforts,

or our religious niceties,

or to quote the church sign on 127th Street: "Be good, Avoid evil, Go to heaven."

Rather, our reconciliation is in Christ who himself is our peace.

Thanks be to God.

Kevin Baker puts it this way:

The unity referred to here is not manufactured by human hands busy trying to pursue multiculturalism and tolerance in the world's image. The peace described here is not just a ceasing of conflict or the absence of violence. The hope alluded to is not merely a hankering after international experiences and cross-cultural encounters. Here unity, peace and hope are not things at all; they are a person. Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall. In Christ's death on the cross, peace has been achieved and hostility has been crucified. Jesus is the singular, God-human wrecking crew that demolishes division and gifts us with unity, peace and reconciliation.

So, lets take that has true ~ in Christ we are reconciled to God and reconciled to one another. The remarkable implication of this new humanity is that those things that once stood as dividing walls, those constructions that we use as barriers, those ways in which we draw lines, they are all obliterated. Now instead of there being

Jew and Gentile, slave or free,

circumcised or uncircumcised, male or female,

black or white, elect or reprobate,

in or out, us or them,

saved or dammed...

Now instead of their being a centrifuge there is a reconciling power of God in Christ:

His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

And, there may be no better sign and seal of that reality than the baptism of babies. For, even while they are unable to answer for themselves, before they think it has anything to do with what they do, God is busy demolishing sin, washing away debris and carefully placing a new, living stone into his holy temple.

Daniel Gordon and Warren John are not rubble to be discarded or raw crude material waiting to be polished and made acceptable. But, they are the very beings in which God would build his dwelling. By the grace of God in Christ they belong to a new humanity.

We've wondered here at Hope what gift to give as a reminder to parents and babies of their baptism. We don't have very good ideas. Flowers fade and baptismal certificates wither. Maybe we should give rocks ~ solid reminders that reconciliation is a gift freely given and that they are part of a cathedral in which God lives.

That reality is a gift that can be cherished, nurtured, and celebrated.

It is also a gift that, although it can't be taken back, can be shunned, resisted, squandered and profaned. We gather here at Hope to teach, remind, encourage, and celebrate the rocks that we already are.

Dear children of God.

You are chosen by God in Christ.

You are reconciled to God by Christ.

Thanks be to God.

Oh! One last thing....

Even though reality is changed in Christ we clearly still live with the vestiges of sin and separation. The centrifuge is spinning in overtime. But, let me offer a few practical implications of this new reality. Let me offer a way to respond to this good news.

- Rest. May you rest in the good news that you are reconciled to God.
- Repent. The beginning place of reconciliation is the recognition that a relationship is broken by sin.
- Repair. What if as an expression of our new humanity this week we went with open hands and repentant hearts to repair a relationship that knows the walls of separation?
- Renew. May we be a community that continually renews a commitment to seek and serve in those places where race, or class, or gender, or orientation, become walls that threaten the new humanity. I have no misgivings about that demand and difficulty. I have no misgivings about our own (my own) barriers. But, that calling seems part of the essential purpose of God in Christ ~ not just superstition and the promise of heaven, but following the way of the cross.

Rest. Repent. Repair. Renew. Rejoice.....

For, if Walt Kowalski is right than we should be touselled on the head and sent away like naive children, but if Paul is right than we are reconciled with God in Christ and we are a new humanity.

Thanks be to God!
Amen.