

February 14, 2024 – 2 Corinthians 5:16-6:10

Five months ago, a couple of the elders and I attended a seminar entitled “Conflict Resolution vs Reconciliation.” It was created by an LCMS service organization known as the Ambassadors of Reconciliation. And the seminar was good. Really good. Good enough that when it was mentioned that Ambassadors of Reconciliation had also put together a Lenten sermon series, the elders immediately looked at me and said, “We need to use that at Immanuel next year.” So here we are.

But before we get into the Lenten series itself, I want to start by addressing the core premise of the Ambassadors of Reconciliation. Which is exactly what that first seminar was about: conflict resolution and reconciliation are two completely different things. And yet, we rarely acknowledge the difference. And that has implications for both our life together as a church and for our spiritual lives in Jesus Christ.

Because the world functions with the goal of conflict resolution. Nobody likes conflict, after all. You don't have to be a Christian to want to see conflict end. And that's true on both a large and a small scale.

We're horrified by the big conflicts in our world. We've got two significant wars happening right now, in the Ukraine and Gaza. Plus plenty of smaller conflicts all over the globe. Nobody wants to see that happening. And everybody is doing their best to find a way to achieve peace. A resolution to the conflict.

But conflict happens on a smaller scale on a regular basis as well. It happens in our homes, as husbands argue with wives and parents argue with children. It happens in our communities, as police confront criminals and citizens disagree with their leaders. And it happens in our churches, with pastors clashing with officers regarding the priorities of the congregation and members clashing with other members towards the best use of finite resources. Conflict is everywhere. And we just want it resolved.

The world achieves this resolution in very worldly ways. Typically by addressing the issues involved. Take the war in the Ukraine, for example. What is the main issue there? Well, it's land. And any peace between the Ukraine and Russia will rest upon that issue: who gets the land? Who gets Crimea? Who gets the Donbas? That's how the conflict will be resolved.

The same is true of other conflicts in our homes and communities. Whether it's land or money or time or pleasure or power or any number of other worldly things. Resolve the issue and you resolve the conflict.

There's just one problem with that way of thinking, though. While the conflict may be resolved, the relationship is still destroyed. It doesn't matter who gets the land, the Ukraine and Russia will hate each other for generations to come. You might achieve peace in the Middle East, but the Jews and Palestinians will still despise each other. You can throw money at whole lot of marital problems and temporarily resolve the conflict. But that doesn't mean you've repaired the relationship.

Ash Wednesday actually has it's roots in this very concept. In the early church, one of the hardest, most emotional decisions they had to make was accepting apostates back into their fellowship. An apostate is someone who was a Christian, but has denied Christ. And, in many cases, apostasy happened because of persecution. Faced with possible torture and a gruesome death, some people gave into their fears and renounced their faith, only to regret it later and seek to rejoin the church.

What do you do with them? No sin is unforgivable. But at the same time, they haven't just betrayed their Lord. They've betrayed their Church too. They've saved their own skin when so many others died a martyr's death. Imagine how you would feel if your own mother or father, son or daughter, sister or brother, had been fed to lions rather than renounce Christ, but this guy over here got away scot free and now wants to keep calling himself a Christian and a member of your congregation.

The solution the church came up with was to bring the apostate in front of the church, have him confess his sins publicly, and pour ashes over his head. Putting ashes on your head is a sign of mourning in the Bible. And this imposition of ashes demonstrated that the apostate man was mourning his sins. That he recognized how wrong it was to deny his Lord. And that he wanted everyone to know how sorry he was for betraying them. Over time, that same imposition of ashes became the rite that we participated in a few minutes ago.

The church needs to be a place not simply of conflict resolution, but of reconciliation. It needs to be a place where relationships are restored. The issues in the conflict are, quite frankly, irrelevant. Things like money and power are things of this world. They are temporary and as fleeting as this mortal life we live. But the love we have for each other, and the anger we feel when we've been sinned against, these are the things that build up or tear apart a congregation.

And so we are, indeed, ambassadors of reconciliation. An ambassador doesn't speak for himself. He speaks on behalf of someone more powerful than him. He delivers a message that is not his own. And so we are ambassadors of Christ. God is making his appeal through us.

But not just an appeal for reconciliation with our brothers and sisters in the faith. No, if that's all it were, it would be a hopeless appeal. Because we are incapable of reconciliation on our own. As sinful human beings, our hate and pride and jealousy will always get in the way of true reconciliation. The world doesn't know how to reconcile because it doesn't know Christ. And so conflict resolution is the best it can muster.

For a Christian, reconciliation is a gift of the Holy Spirit. And as the Spirit always does, he brings this reconciliation by pointing us to Christ. For Christ has reconciled us to himself.

How did Christ do this? Simple: by forgiving us. By not counting our trespasses against us. Christ didn't resolve the conflict. Had Christ resolved the conflict, then the resolution would have come only by resolving the primary issue, which was our sins.

Resolving the conflict would have meant demanding payment for our sins. Demanding good works that matched and exceeded our sinfulness. Demanding sacrifice that matched and exceeded our trespasses. Do enough good works, make enough sacrifices, and the conflict is resolved.

Except there's just two problems with that. Number one, no amount of good works or sacrifices could have paid the debt of sin we owed. There was no hope of resolving this conflict. And number two, even if we had, the relationship between God and man would still be broken. We would pay God back, but hate him for imposing his law upon us.

And so, instead, Christ reconciled us to himself. He didn't resolve the conflict. He simply forgave our sins. He looked at us and said, "Our relationship is more important to me than the issue of your sin. I love you too much for your sin to come between us. So I'm just not going to count your trespasses against you anymore." That's what reconciliation looks like.

We have a ministry of reconciliation. We have a message of reconciliation. And it has been entrusted to us by God himself. The church is not a place where conflict is resolved. It is a place where people are reconciled. Reconciled through confession and forgiveness. Reconciled in the exact same way that Christ reconciles us to himself.

The church is a place where we say to each other, "Our relationship is more important to me than being right. Our relationship is more important to me than getting my way. Our relationship is more important to me than the sin you committed against me. I love you too much for any of that to come between us. Christ wouldn't let it come between me and him. So I'm not going to let it come between you and me." That is what a ministry of reconciliation looks like.

Is it easy? Of course not. Will we do it perfectly? Of course not. But these ashes on our foreheads are a good start. Because these ashes remind us that we are dust and to dust we return. We are mortal creatures in a world that will one day come to an end. And the things we argue about are nothing in comparison to the eternal treasures of God's kingdom. The treasures granted to us through the cross of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.