

Ask almost anyone about the central symbol of the Christian faith and they will point to the cross. It's ironic that what was once considered the cruelest form of capital punishment came to be one of Christianity's most important and beloved symbols. But the cross is so much more than a symbol of our faith, the Christian vision itself is cruciform in nature—the cross is the lens through which we see God, ourselves, and the world.

Last week I began a new preaching series entitled, *The Wonder Of The Cross*, and it's my hope that as we make our way towards Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday, we will find ourselves growing in wonder and worship. Each week we're going to focus on a particular New Testament word that reveals a part of the wonder of the cross—the word for this morning is **reconciliation**.

illus: I first became aware of broken relationships when I was in Grade Five—my awareness came in the form of firsthand knowledge because I was the one who broke the relationship. I was a 10 year old preteen boy, in a classroom filled with preteen boys and girls. We were learning the standard subjects of course—Math, Science, and English—but we were also learning about the complexity of relationships.

Part way through the year, it became clear that certain girls began to “like” certain boys. I was what one might call a “late-bloomer;” it wasn't until the end of Grade 7 or the beginning of Grade 8 that I began to really notice girls. When I was in Grade 5, I wasn't worried about what clothes I was wearing or whether my hair was combed, I was only interested in spending time with my guy friends and playing sports. But then it happened.

It was brought to my attention that one of the girls in the class, Voula, liked me. When I say that it was brought to my attention, what I mean to say is that my guy friends teased and taunted me: “*Mark and Voula sitting in a tree, k.i.s.s.i.n.g, first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes a baby in a baby carriage.*”

Looking back now, through 43 year old eyes, it's laughable, but it wasn't funny then, it was a problem, Voula liking me was a problem, that I needed to solve. How does a 10 year old boy get a 10 year old girl to stop liking them? There's one tried-and-true solution— you treat them cruelly and that's exactly what I did.

I took a piece of paper, drew a picture of Voula, and once completed, I went up to her and said, “*Look at the picture I drew of you.*” I had drawn a hippopotamus with her name over top. I don't know what I thought would happen but Voula just stood there in front of my picture, word-less, tears forming in her eyes, and then she walked away. Something broke between us, something deeper than her preteen crush—her trust was broken and so was my sense of honour. For the next few years we simply avoided one another; she avoided me out of hurt, and I avoided her because of my shame.

If only broken relationships were reserved to when we were young, foolish, and didn't know better. The truth of the matter is that broken relationships come at any and every stage of our lives. Relationships between grandparents and grandchildren break down. Deep friendships break down. Marriages break down. Business relationships break down. Even relationships between countries break down—every broken relationship has a cause and an effect.

Biblically speaking, the hidden, or not-so-hidden, cause behind every broken relationship is sin. As I said last week, we need to expand our definition of sin beyond the classic “right vs. wrong,” to include the other dimensions found within the Scriptures.

At times the Bible describes sin as *rebellion*, as *infidelity*, and as *disloyalty*. *Rebellion*, *infidelity*, and *disloyalty* are behaviours that results in the betrayal and breaking of relationship. When we, or others, fail to keep our promises, fail to love, or to fail to remain loyal, relationships inevitably break down. We all need to be reconciled to someone—*who do you need to be reconciled to?*

To “**reconcile**” literally means “*to exchange, or, to bring into a changed relationship*.” When we look to the Cross we see two intersecting beams—the vertical and the horizontal; think of these beams in terms of our relationship with God and one another. It’s here at the Cross that broken relationships can be mended. God has acted in Christ to reconcile humanity to Himself, and, to reconcile us to one another.

When we fail to love and honour God, it’s only a matter of time before we fail to love and honour people who have been made in His image. This morning I’m going to begin by talking about how the Cross reconciles humanity to God—this reconciliation sets the stage for Christ’s reconciling work among humanity.

1. The Vertical Dimension (Being Reconciling to God): Let’s go back to the beginning—to Adam, and Eve in the Garden with God. What must it have been like? Can you even imagine a perfect relationship? No barriers, no suspicion or mistrust, no reason to grasp or control, nothing to forgive. We’re told that this paradise-like

reality didn’t last forever; it wasn’t long before Adam and Eve were tempted to doubt God’s goodness. The first recorded sin is the sin of mistrust—*maybe God doesn’t have our best interests in mind, maybe He’s holding out on us—maybe He’s holding us back; we need to take what is His in order to be satisfied*.

They swallowed these lies, and their behaviour quickly followed suit — in breaking God’s explicit instructions, they broke a relationship of love, trust, and loyalty. The moment they rebelled against God, we’re told that “*their eyes were opened*,” they became aware they had broken something and their first instinct was to hide.

Genesis 3:8-10 says, “*the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’ [Adam] answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid’*”.

illus: When I was young, misbehaving, and pushing the limit with my mom, at times she would say something like, “Go to your room and wait until your father comes home.” You know what I did? I would sit alone in my room and I would wish for my father to never come home. Sin has a way of twisting everything—I love my father and he loved me, and yet I was wishing him out of my life to avoid the consequences of my behaviour.

Can you picture Adam and Eve, hiding among the trees, shushing one another—*He’s coming, be quiet, don’t let Him see you; maybe He’ll stop looking and go away*. Only three chapters into the Bible and we encounter one of the saddest stories; this story shapes the rest of the Bible’s narrative.

The human story is ultimately one of wandering away from God; it is the story of looking anywhere and everywhere but God to find satisfaction. Hosea 11 outlines God's charge against Israel and all humanity:

*When Israel was a child, I loved him; I called him out of slavery but the more I called, the more Israel turned away from Me. I was a good Father but my people were blind to my goodness. Many people name Me as their God but even these have broken relationship with Me. Their love for me is like the morning mist, like the early dew that quickly disappears. **What shall I do? I cannot let them go! I will not destroy them, I will not abandon them, for I am God and not like these humans.***¹

When a relationship has been broken, rarely can the one who has done the breaking bring about the repair. For reconciliation to take place, forgiveness must first be offered in order to be received—often, the one who has been injured must take the first step. This is certainly true of God, in Christ, at the cross.

Let me encourage you to turn with me to Romans 5, starting at verse 6. You can follow along with me in your Bible or on the screen behind me.

“at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us...10 For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! 11 Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

Verses 6-8 follows a basic outline: vs. 6 states the premise—*Christ died for the ungodly*; vs. 7 comments on it—it's incredibly rare to find someone who's willing to die for a worthy person; and vs. 8 draws the conclusion—the cross of Christ reveals the magnitude of God's love. The work of reconciliation is God's initiative, fuelled by His steadfast love.²

It's very important that we understand the order of Paul's thought. God acted in Christ before humanity wanted to be reconciled; God didn't reconcile humanity so that He could love us, He loved us while we were still enemies. Put another way, while humanity was still running from God, He took the initiative to draw near.

But even if we begin to grasp the enormity of God's love, the question must be asked: *how did the death of Jesus bring about life and forgiveness for humanity?* The answer is wrapped up in this word “reconcile”.

The New Testament Greek equivalent of the word “reconcile” is *katallasso*, and this verb expresses the idea of a substitutionary

¹ Hosea 6:4; 11:1-4, 7-9.

² N.T. Wright, *The Day Revolution Began*, 137.

exchange. This magnificent exchange takes place in and through Jesus Christ.

Scottish theologian, Andrew Purves writes, “Jesus Christ is...both the turning of God towards humanity and the turning of humanity towards God.”³ In becoming human, God the Son bound Himself to our sinful condition—He became what we are, that we might receive what is His. Jesus took our place that we might have His place. He was God, made man, standing in for us as our substitute.

The Bible speaks of this magnificent exchange in a variety of ways:

- He took on mortality, that we might be clothed with immortality (1 For. 15:48-54);
- He descended to earth, that we might ascend to heaven (Jn. 1:14; 14:3);
- He became poor, that we might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9);
- He was bruised, and we are healed (Is. 53:5);
- He became sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

As we read the account of the crucifixion, there is a weight to the words Jesus spoke from the cross. In Mark 15:33 and following we read, “*At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’*”

In that moment, with the weight of world’s sin upon Him, Jesus experienced what all of us have experienced—a break in relationship with the Father. In his humanity, Jesus experienced the private hell of

separation, alienation from God, and He cried out in anguish. Jesus knows our pain, He took it upon Himself—He is our substitute. But in a magnificent exchange, He took our forsakenness upon Himself, he was rejected, that we might be accepted.

Before Jesus breathed His last, He said, “*It is finished!*” What was finished? At the cross, the gulf between humanity and God has been bridged. At the cross, our broken relationship has been mended. At the cross, separation, alienation, has been healed. Through the cross of Christ, the entire world has been provisionally reconciled to God—all that remains is for us to receive this reconciliation, by faith in Christ’s finished work.

When our relationship with God is broken, the one who has done the breaking cannot bring about the repair. For reconciliation to take place, forgiveness must first be offered in order to be received—the One who has been injured must take the first step. This is what God has done for us in Christ, at the cross. I wonder, *do you need to be reconciled to God?*

Reconciliation is only a prayer away; perhaps you want to pray the following prayer with me—*God I have a habit of breaking relationship, and I know I have broken relationship with You. I have not loved You, listened to You, or followed You as You deserve. I want to be reconciled to You and today I accept Jesus as my substitute—He was forsaken that I might be accepted, He died that I might live. Thank you for accepting and forgiving me; fill me with Your Holy Spirit that I might walk in relationship with You. Amen.*

³ Andrew Purves, *Exploring Christology & Atonement*, 227.

If you prayed this prayer this morning, the magnificent exchange has taken place—Jesus has taken what is yours (separation, alienation) and given you what is His.

Reconciling Relationship With Others: In the time remaining, I want to talk about the horizontal aspect of reconciliation. I said earlier that when we fail to love and honour God, it's only a matter of time before we fail to love and honour people who have been made in His image. Broken people live out of their brokenness, and in so doing we damage the relationships we find themselves in.

Israel and Palestine, North and South Korea, Tutsis and Hutus, Serbs and Croats, Blacks and Whites, First Nations and Caucasians—shall I go on? We live in a world that needs reconciliation; each of us exists within a web of relationships that needs varying degrees of reconciliation. At the cross we are reconciled to God; at the cross, reconciliation with one another becomes possible.

In Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul addresses two sworn—and racially segregated—enemies: Jew and Gentiles. This is what he writes, beginning in vs. 13,

*“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **14** For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, **15**...His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, **16** and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross...**18** For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.”*

Jesus was rejected and we are accepted, He was forsaken and we are forgiven—this is the basis of our life together. When we are forgiven and reconciled to God, we are given a mission to go and do likewise. Because we are loved by God, we can love others—even our enemies. Because we have been forgiven, we can forgive others—even our enemies. Because we have been reconciled, because God took the first towards us, we can be agents of reconciliation—we can take the first step towards others.

Can I ask you this morning, *who do you need to be reconciled to?*
And where might God be asking you to take a first step?

I'm afraid there is more to be said than I have time to say in this sermon, perhaps even more that I could be said in a series of sermons. Reconciliation is difficult, and often times, messy work—it requires both courage and wisdom. Reconciliation isn't always possible—it requires two willing parties; your willingness alone isn't enough to make peace.

You may have a relationship that has been broken by violence or abuse—forgiveness and reconciliation aren't necessarily the same thing; putting yourself back into a destructive relationship doesn't honour God or yourself. Perhaps the person with whom you most want to reconcile—a parent, a friend, a child—may no longer be alive. Under these circumstances, full resolution isn't possible, but God knows the desire of your heart and He can bring a measure of peace and reconciliation as you turn to Him in prayer.

As I conclude this morning, I want to share a part of the reconciling work God has been doing in my family—I trust it will be an encouragement to you.

illus: This is a picture of Goy, Anna's birth mother. I'm not going to go into the details as to why Anna was given up for adoption, but I will say this—Goy wanted what was best for Anna and she knew she couldn't provide for her needs. As adoptive parents, our joy in being Anna's parents is balanced by Goy's pain in giving her up.

Goy doesn't speak any English and we don't speak any Thai; we live in North Vancouver and she lives south of Bangkok—our lives are literally a world apart. Anna was raised until the age of two by Jane—an Australian missionary to Thailand. When we decided to reach out to Goy, it was Jane who made it possible.

Every few months Naomi would write a letter to Goy, describing the things every mother would want to know—what Anna enjoyed doing, what her personality was like, what made her laugh, what she was learning, etc. After writing the letter, Naomi would include a number of pictures and then send it off to Jane; Jane would translate the letter into Thai and forward it on to Goy.

In the years that followed we prayed for Goy, we talked with Anna about her birth mom, and the country of her birth. As we talked it became clear that it was important to Anna, and to all of us, that we go back to Thailand and spend time with Goy. When we told Naomi's extended family, her mom and dad, sister, brother-in-law, and their kids asked to come with us.

I have to admit, Naomi and I were nervous about meeting Goy. Would it be traumatic for Anna? Would it be traumatic for Goy? Goy is Anna's birth mom and that makes her a part of our family—our prayer was that our time together would be healing for her, for Anna,

and for us. Naomi and I decided in advance that as much as possible, we were going to allow Goy to enjoy Anna without being jealous, over-protective, parents. We have Anna for a lifetime and Goy could only be with us for 2.5 days.

I can remember the moment I saw Goy. Our family of 10 was in Chiang Mai, having breakfast in the hotel restaurant, waiting for Jane to call. Goy was busing in from out of town, Jane was going to pick her up, call us when she arrived, and then we were to meet at Jane's house. You can imagine my surprise when I looked up and saw Goy and Jane entering the hotel restaurant.

I stood up and Anna stood up with me, and when Goy saw Anna, she came running across the room—the moment she got within arms reach she swept Anna up into the biggest hug you've ever seen. Goy was weeping and Anna was staring up at her with her big brown eyes.

Over the next few days, as we walked through the market, Goy and Anna walked hand in hand. When we went to the park and rented bicycles, Goy and Anna shared a bicycle built for two. Naomi and I shared many smiles as we watched Goy do all the things that mother does with her child—she smoothed down Anna's hair, straightened out rumpled clothes, wiped a smudge of dirt from her face. The joy we saw on Goy's face, the love we saw in her touch was both heart-warming and heart-rending—she was trying to make up 7 years in matter of days, and all too soon they would be separated again.

We spent our final day together at an elephant park; the joy of that day was only eclipsed by the pain of having to say goodbye. Before Goy left with Jane, Jane translated Goy's goodbye for us—this is

what she said to us: *I want you to know that I trust you to parent Anna—I can see how much you and your entire family loves her. And I want to thank you for making me a part of your family. The next time you come back to Thailand, would you come and meet my family? I would like to introduce you to Anna's grandparents, Aunts, Uncles, and cousins.*

Try to imagine it if you can—all 12 of us, locked in a group hug, bawling our eyes out, in the middle of an elephant park, with tourists milling all around us.

When I think about that moment, I can't help but think of reconciliation—in a small way, something that had been broken was being mended. But if it weren't for brokenness, we would have never met Anna—she would have lived on the other side of the world and we would never have known she existed.

And if it weren't for Christ, we would have never sought Goy out—the potential for pain was far too great. But reconciliation isn't just something that Christ does to us or for us, by the grace of God, it's something we participate in and extend to others. My dear people, be reconciled to God, and then let us be agents of reconciliation everywhere we go.

At this time I want to invite the worship team to come and lead us in a concluding song; as they come, let us pray together.

Worship

Benediction