

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2010
Lessons: Joshua 5:9-12, II Corinthians 5:16-21, and Luke 15:1-7

FORTY-THREE YEARS LATER

In his famous poem, “Harlem,” Langston Hughes asks us all the question, “What happens to a dream deferred?” Beneath the question of what happens to the dream itself lies, of course, that of what happens to a person or a people whose dreams are deferred. Do they “dry up like a raisin in the sun,” or do they “fester like a sore”? Do the people go on generation after generation with shoulders sagging under the heavy load, or does their shame turn to anger and explode?

To be made a slave people is to have all dreams deferred, cut off, denied validity and possibility. It is to be told with authority, “You will never be anything but what you are right now, a slave. Until you die, you will exist outside the circles of hope and aspiration. So, there is no need for you to dream.”

Imagine, then, how it feels for Joshua and the Israelites to hear what God now says to them. Yes, they had left behind the situation of their slavery in Egypt, the external forms of their labor in bondage, but they had not yet become an independent people living, working, striving, and dreaming in a land of their own. Yes, they could dream again but only slaves’ dreams. With a wondrous grace, God sees that the symbol of their persistent internal servitude is the manna from heaven. They are still being fed without effort to provide for themselves. True, it is no longer their task masters who feed them, as in Egypt; it is their covenant God who provides the manna for them, and, yes, they are learning that we human beings are not autonomous but reliant upon the love and mercy of our God; but even so, their being fed without working for their food renders them still feeling like children. But now, God says to them, “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” Then the Israelites kept Passover, and the next day ate the produce of the land that would become their own. The dream was no longer deferred. The shame of the slavery was now to be for them a memory, but an important memory reminding them to be forever fair and more than fair to any people kept at a disadvantage. They were to respect those granted no respect in the world. They were to give help without taking away the dignity of the person in need of assistance. Their former shame was now to become their present and future empathy with the humiliated and compassion, not pity, for those still shouldering the burden of disgrace.

Forty-three years have passed, and I can hardly believe it has been so long. Forty-three years ago, our Presbyterian Church adopted the *Confession of 1967* which was developed from the Bible's theme of reconciliation as the work of Jesus Christ and his ambassadors in this world. I had the privilege of coming to know, a little, the man who chaired the development of the confession — one of my professors in seminary, Edward Dowey. He was not only a scholar and teacher but also a humble servant of Jesus Christ and his church. Some of you may recall that reaction against the new confession and the very idea of having a new confession was intense, and the forces that rose up against it were heavily supported by wealth and power. I gleaned from conversations with Ed Dowey just hints of the attacks upon him, his committee, and his work.

Today, the *Confession of 1967* is established as one of the eleven historic confessions of faith that guide Presbyterian thought and belief, under the authority of the Bible. As for the reactionary position that the church should not change with the times and situations of human life, it has done its damage to the church and continues to wreak havoc. The irony is that we are a Protestant denomination, and in the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther and the other reformers liberated us so the church could and would change with the times. That liberation is the meaning and force of Luther's insistence upon *sola scriptura*, meaning the Bible alone is kept unchanged and has scriptural authority in the church. He set us free from standards that would tighten their choke holds on the church as they became increasingly outdated and incomprehensible to the living people.

Sin is not violation of the standards. For the Bible, like every important matter of human life, sin is relational. A particular act is a sin because it violates our relatedness to God and to each other, not because it merely breaks a rule. Echoing Jesus, the apostle Paul tells us to keep the one rule to love our neighbor as ourselves so we will do no harm to others. We need to be careful here. It is easy to say that love is God's one standard, and it is; but love is easily misunderstood and misrepresented as mere indulgence, sentimentalized tolerance, and smiling indifference. We have as many ways of making love wimpy and ineffective as we have ways of making standards cruel and heartless.

For me, the great strength of the *Confession of 1967* is that it recognizes and faces up to the realities of the many divisions in the church, the society, and the world. Our human community is a house divided against itself, and C67, as it is known, insists that we are called by Jesus Christ to the hard, frustrating, and sometimes dangerous work of reconciliation, rather than the passive and unloving position of mere tolerance that maintains what it calls peace by keeping its distance.

Jesus insists that God is never indifferent toward people or toward any person's fate. The responsible shepherd will surely go out into the night after the one lost sheep, because

that's what it is to be a shepherd. How much more, then, will the one who represents God fully and bodily in this world go out into the darkness after the person who is lost! That's what it is to be the Christ of God, and that's what it is to represent God's Christ in this world.

Tolerance for other groups or "types" of people has but one tiny virtue: it is better than intolerance. But, we need to realize that mere tolerance is always just one offense away from intolerance. Sin is *alienation* from which arise all particular sins and hurtful actions, whether active and aggressive or passive and indifferent. We are created to be the human community in harmony with the ways of God. Harmony does not require sameness; in fact, the very idea of harmony makes no sense if everyone sings the same notes at the same pitch. We are divided. The Bible goes to great lengths to expose the depth and bitterness of our divisions. And still we often think and speak of faith as a private matter between the individual and God, which means we maintain our divisions even in our faith and go to God separately.

Love for our neighbor, whether that neighbor is a person, a family, or a group begins with respect, and respect begins with empathy, which is humble and unpretentious. In that spirit, respect seeks mutual understanding. But the path is not smooth. Old hurts fester. Shame remembered joins with indignities still experienced to fuel further resentment, anger, and alienation. Small offenses sound to the indifferent like petty gripes when in truth they are fresh reminders that prick at old wounds. It is hard and sometimes dangerous work to reach across barriers that have long stood between people. It is also hard and easily damaged work to reach across barriers of hurt and resentment that separate people from God. Here we need to stifle the word "should" and accept the fact that many people around us have deep visceral reactions against Christianity and against the very name of Jesus or the word "God." And many of them have reasons, real reasons, for their aversion to everything they think we stand for. Some would not enter a church if you paid them; others sit in church pews on Sunday mornings, saying the words and singing the hymns, holding somehow to something that has been slipping though their fingers for a long time.

Paul says Jesus has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation: of enabling people to be restored to the God who loves them and to each other. That stewardship, that ministry, that imperative, has not been completed in the past forty-three years. The one who is God's Christ is still calling and still sends us into the world. Amen.