

Preaching Reconciliation in the World of Long Memories

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I can think of no subject more difficult to address than this one! So taxing is it that I very nearly capitulated to silence before composing one word—even toyed with the idea of telling my friend, Walter Brueggemann, that I never received his invitation to write such a piece. (Perhaps after you have read it you will wish I had done just that!)

Not only is the subject as such complicated in the extreme, but who can say anything worthwhile on such a theme without offending someone? I have never shied away from offense, to be sure. How can you, when you are dealing with the gospel of “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (see I Cor. 1 and 2)? But one doesn’t want to offend carelessly, falsely, cheaply; for, the ‘scandal of the cross’ notwithstanding, the object of theology is not to scandalize but to illumine.

The problem, however, is that in the present world context, any discussion of the *always* complex subject of reconciliation, Christianly understood, is made doubly complex because of the competing claims of the parties between or among whom reconciliation is hoped for. For, not always, but often, these claims can both be endorsed by thinking Christians. For example, no serious Christian could reject the Israeli claim to a homeland. For both negative (centuries of Christian anti-Judaism) and positive (Christian participation in the creation of modern Israel) reasons, that claim has to be honored. At the same time, responsible Christians cannot ignore the truly abysmal plight of the Palestinian people. Any talk of reconciliation here has to reckon with the prospect that it will be not only simplistic, but that it may also be open to misinterpretation and misuse by one or other of the parties involved, thus contributing to the very alienation that it intends to heal.

Or, at the level of personal ethics, Christians are obliged, surely, to take with great and sympathetic seriousness the claims of abused and victimized persons. At the same time, their faith has taught them (or it ought to have!) that radical evil is transcendent of individuals, that the world is not easily divisible into good and bad “guys,” that forgiveness and new life are possible—also for abusers and victimizers. But how can you talk about all that without seeming to betray one party or the other?

In short, the subject of reconciliation in such a world as this is so delicate, even so *dangerous* a one that one’s natural inclination is to suppress it before one gets into hot water! Which, I suspect, is why the subject is so seldom gone into in our churches, apart from pious generalization and symbolic affirmations of the fact that we Christians think reconciliation a Good Thing.

My modest intention in what follows is to suggest three ‘preliminary considerations’, as they may be called, for Christians attempting to “preach reconciliation” (which I trust also means practicing what we preach!). The first has to do with truth, the second with justice, the third with hope.

Truth-Orientation

Our worldly context is described, in the topic as assigned, as “The World of Long

Memories.” That designation, I think, is where our thoughts on this subject must begin. It’s a very provocative phrase! One knows exactly what it means—how could one not? Every news report draws upon the theme. A man of fifty or sixty remembers that he was abused by his parish priest when he was ten or twelve. A council of indigenous people remembers that its forebears were promised certain compensations for their land, now seemingly, conveniently forgotten. Citizens remember that those currently in power gained that power through high-minded promises they have not even attempted to fulfill. Our world is fairly jingling with the remembered ills of its inhabitants, some of them immediately recognizable as legitimate, some justifiably demanding investigation, some apparently frivolous or paranoid—yet who knows? In a society of victims, it takes little to evoke in every one of us some memory of how we have been wronged. And what if the *non*-human creatures of the planet could add their voices to this chorus?

Human conflicts always involve memory—are fueled by memories. And ours seems indeed to be “a world of *long* memories.” But is it? Clearly it is one in which some things are remembered for a long time. But is this not a highly selective kind of remembering? Americans remember that their entry, late in time, into two world wars tipped the scales against the victory of German and Japanese imperialism. But few seem to remember that other kinds of U.S. involvement in planetary life have constituted and continue to constitute for many nations and peoples an imperialism far more subtle than the old-fashioned posturing of yesterday’s bullies. Canadians of WASPish origins, like me, remember with pride our courageous, long-suffering British pioneers; but we forget the peoples they displaced, and we make no connections between our own brave forebears and the *new* newcomers who like the newcomers of old are also ‘displaced persons’ seeking a place in the sun.

Yes, there are long memories; but they are also random, romanticized, self-absorbed memories, many of them; and with the exception of an elite that is actually informed, they are nearly always memories isolated from any broad awareness of contexts and devoid of the kind of critical consciousness that is able to distinguish rumor, hearsay, and biased generalization from fact. Universally and with abounding legitimacy, educators complain that history is today treated as a luxury, if not an irrelevancy, in our technique-driven educational institutions. As a populace, present-day North Americans know less about the past than did our parents and grandparents. My mother’s generation may have been given a biased account of Canada’s beginnings, but at least they were given an account! Today, partly on account of the multiracial, multicultural, and religiously pluralistic character of our society, but also partly because we do not value it, history is either so marginalized in our curricula or so garbled by “postmodern” fragmentation that only a small minority of tomorrow’s citizens will have *any* kind of interpretive criteria for recalling and sorting out the realities of our past—of how we got this way!

Even more to the point, the public mood is notoriously receptive to some accounts of reality and closed to others. The most obvious illustration of this is the exceptional readiness of the American public today to believe the Bush administration’s rationale for the war on Iraq that it is determined to initiate with or without UN participation. The atmosphere of cautiousness and fear created by the events of September 11th, 2001 almost guarantees that the majority of U.S. citizens will find any suggestion of reconciliation with Iraq ridiculous, if not “un-American,” even if it originates with the

Democratically controlled Senate.

The same propensity to hear one-sided stories is illustrated by the almost prurient interest our public manifests in every new revelation of sexual misdemeanor on the part of Christian clergy. Without condoning any or all such behavior, perceptive observers of our times would have to recognize in this situation both the inordinate preoccupation with sex that sways our entire civilization, and also a not-very-subtle, if deeply repressed, public disenchantment with 'the church'—a disenchantment giving rise, sometimes, to *Schadenfreude* and the satisfactions of revenge.

Long memory?

Surely the first responsibility of Christians (and others) who want to introduce something approximating reconciliation into this alienated and violent world should be to provide a forum for the informing, enlarging, and refining of memory. At a time when random and voluminous "information" is mistaken for knowledge, and plain prejudice and opinion for truth, no greater service could be given than one aimed at expanding the human capacity for truth-orientation.

Mark well: *truth-orientation*. No one, least of all the Church of Jesus Christ who "is" Truth, *possesses* the truth. Truth is not possessible, for it is a living thing. But humans may be *turned toward* it, may desire it, may prefer it to other possible priorities—such as comfort. Above all, human beings may be liberated from bondage to propaganda and prejudice and lies—from simplistic world views and ideologies and 'stories' made powerful by current social moods and trends, or through their constant and rote repetition, generation after generation. The Truth—that is, disciplined orientation toward the living Truth that defies possession—does indeed, as the New Testament says, "make free."

And the church, if ever it can overcome its own idolatrous and pretentious claim to be the sole possessor of truth, *could become a sphere of such orientation*. I know that is a big order, because even when (as it sometimes happens) Christian communities finally recognize they do not "have" the truth but can only stand looking at it from afar, like the disciples watching Jesus ascend into the heavens—even then, after sixteen odd centuries of triumphant claims to finality, Christianity can hardly overcome its reputation for wanting to cram "the Truth" down everybody's throats. All the same, we have shown, in recent decades, a new and rather admirable potentiality for critical and *self-critical* reflection upon matters of truth. In certain quarters, we have even been ready to call in question hoary "Christian" verities—to probe the authenticity of our own "Christian" *memoria*; to re-examine regnant traditions that have had the effect of excluding whole genders and species and races, and search our larger history for submerged traditions that enlarge and correct our supposedly "long memories." Yes, we have had a certain amount of practical experience in the difficult business of remembering; and in fact our best *hopes* as Christians today have come to the fore only as we submitted ourselves to the rigors of enlarging and purifying memory. It is not accidental that the most notable approximations of "reconciliation" in recent experience have been preceded and inspired by 'truth commissions' originating, often, in the Christian imagination.

Justice—To What End?

Reconciliation implies the actualization of justice. It would not be an authentic reconciliation unless the causes of alienation and conflict had been acknowledged by

all concerned, the faults of the guilty named and admitted, and new attitudes and responsibilities assumed. Justice must be done—must be seen to have been done.

But if our ultimate aim as Christians is indeed *reconciliation*, then doing justice cannot be an end in itself. It is governed, as means, by the end of a new beginning—the overcoming of estrangement, the inauguration of new life, reconciled life.

This qualifying goal of justice, Christianly conceived, has frequently been ignored or overlooked in both secular and religious life. Where the secular world is concerned, it may not be possible to ask for anything more than that justice be done. I do not think that we should require the state to be governed by love, forgiveness, and compassion, all prominent ingredients in the biblical concept of reconciliation—though we may and should admonish the governing authorities to remember that “the quality of mercy is not strained . . .”! But when the church of Jesus Christ advances an ethic of justice that is uninformed by the theology of justification “by grace alone” (viz., that we ourselves are only “accounted” just!), and uninspired by any end greater than justice as such, then the church has abandoned its own traditions of wisdom in favor of a tit-for-tat morality that leads nowhere—certainly not to reconciliation.

And has there not been a great deal of loose talk, in the churches, about justice? Have we not been subjected to too many ethical imperatives that have no grounding in theological indicatives? In the post-Calvinist society, does not a new and vengeful puritanism often show through, a puritanism that the New England Puritans might well have found excessive, lacking as it does any transcendent dimension?

The need to draw attention to existing injustices—yes, it is a real need; but surely in the Christian community it should not be allowed to have the effect of extracting the biblical demand for justice from the matrix of grace, compassion, and redemption in which it is set. Nowhere is the need for engaged and serious *theological* renewal in the churches in greater evidence than in the moral pronouncements of Christian bodies that are no more than stained-glass replicas of the dominant morality—or, perhaps, reactions to the same. The tendency of religion to lapse into legalism and self-righteousness is always great, as the history of the Christian religion also demonstrates; but it is greatest where the concern for justice (often, even, a right and good concern for justice!) becomes an end in itself, without either foundations or goals transcendent of itself.

What do we mean by justice? What kind of justice do we desire, as Christians? An illuminating distinction was made recently by Richard Rohr in an article for *Sojourners* entitled, “Beyond Crime and Punishment.” The article is the response of a respected Roman Catholic thinker to the vexing problem of sexual misconduct on the part of some priests. Rohr writes:

Our Christian goal must still be the healing and reconciliation of the individual and, by implication, of the society. Mercy, patience, forgiveness, absolute trust in the possibility of growth and transformation, and God’s power to save are our specialties, our primary products . . .

Our goal is restorative justice, while the best the system can do is retributive justice. The Law cannot ever promise God’s restorative justice, much less offer true transformation. We have something much better to give, and we had better not lose it out of fear of law-suits or fear of looking foolish. We dare not lose our compassion, our patience, our trust, our

solidarity with sinners, our capacity for simple kindness, or we have lost everything Jesus taught us. We must both protect victims and heal sinners on both sides, an awesome task in this context.¹

The distinction, “restorative justice” and “retributive justice,” ought to inform *every* discussion of matters of justice in the Christian community. Apart from something like this distinction, the temptation is strong in all ethically engaged discourse to mean vengeance when we say ‘justice’.

Reconciliation as Process and Hope

Modern Western peoples in general, and North Americans in particular, have an insatiable—almost an unteachable!—predilection to expect finality. The term “closure” has become, in recent years, one of our most commonly used words. We want immediate and complete settlement of whatever problem confronts us. Is it marriage breakdown? Then let the marriage end straightaway, or let some counselor fix it with all possible haste. Is it the problem of a near-Eastern dictator who will not conform to our decrees? Then let us eliminate him! Is it racial tension? Urban homelessness? Personal illness?—*whatever* it is, there must be a solution, preferably a technical one, because we hate above all else living with unresolved problems.

But if we are serious about reconciliation, Christianly understood, then we had better get used to “the mills of God [that] grind slowly”! In doctrinal language, reconciliation is an *eschatological* matter. “. . . in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. . . .” (2 Cor. 5:19). There is, to be sure, a note of completion in this: “*was*.” But simultaneously the oft-quoted verse speaks of an ongoingness: “*was reconciling*,” not “has reconciled.” Meditating on such a piece of Holy Writ one could get the notion that God himself is still working on the reconciliation project! And when the same passage goes on to assert that God was “entrusting to *us* the message of reconciliation,” thus “making his appeal through us,” that ongoingness is confirmed. Reconciliation is a process, and a category of “hope,” not of “sight”—to use those Pauline polarities.

Do you know of any situation, personal or public, of which you could confidently say that reconciliation *has occurred*, full stop? Sure, there are moments of mutuality, times of extraordinary solidarity, periods of relative peace between ancient enemies or hostile factions, and so on. But . . . “closure”? Surely finality in such a realm as this would have to mean the cessation of life itself. Would have to mean—death! For wherever there is life there are tensions, natural and necessary tensions, tensions built into the nature of things, tensions which, however, are always on the verge of breaking out into howling accusation or wounded silence. Does even death give . . . “closure”? I once heard a well-known Hollywood actor profess that the few minutes before his even-better-known actor father passed away brought a wondrous “closure” to their stormy and decades-long estrangement. Really? Didn’t he just mean that his father had stopped bucking him, having no choice in the matter? And will the son, like many sons, still not have to live year after year with the memory of his father’s disfavor—will not the process of reconciliation, supposing it did achieve a real beginning in those last few moments, have to work itself out day after day in the life of the son, sometimes easily and joyously, sometimes painfully, remorsefully?

There is no need to belabor the point: If and insofar as we Christians are serious about reconciliation; if and insofar as we are not quietly substituting for that high estate

some bourgeois sense of OK-ism, then surely we must accustom ourselves to the fact that the reconciliation God seeks with us and among us is something that will and must go on and on. If it is authentic, it will always be incomplete, partial, fragile; and it will always require of us vigilance, and patience, and the courage to begin again.

So when we approach human conflicts of whatever sort, personal or social, as though we might spend a few hours sorting them out—or even a few months or years!—we are simply imposing upon all involved in them expectations that are humanly absurd, standards that God himself does not apply to us.

I know—such counsel *could* lead to fatalism: nothing of moment can be achieved, nothing profoundly changed. But that assumption (a fault with which Reinhold Niebuhr was always being charged by utopian activists) never occurs to Christians who (like Niebuhr) actually and concretely expose themselves to the real conflicts of their times. Their refusal to demand finality is born of the compassion they feel for imperfect and flawed creatures who, like themselves, could only fall into despair were they confronted by the full demands of a finally-reconciled creaturehood. Such Christians content themselves with “proximate goals” on the way to the ultimate reconciliation that *God* will bring to pass.

Note

¹ *Sojourner* 31, no. 4 (2002): 20.