

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in Creation: Rivalry or Reconciliation”

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Genesis 33:1-11

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

So what are we going to do when it is all over? What are we going to do when the ballots are counted and someone is named the new president of the United States of America. I ask that because during this campaign, as much as during any campaign in my memory, we have become a nation divided. We have become divided not only over policy but over words; people speaking of the other side as demonic or deplorable, of being unfit for office, of being liars and con artists, of lock her up and locker-room language of sexual assault. We have become a nation of angry people where someone this week said she was ready for a revolution if her candidate did not win. So what are we going to do when it is all over? What are we as followers of Jesus Christ going to do? I ask because it seems to me as if we have two choices. We can either choose rivalry or reconciliation. We can continue to be a divided people or we can work to come back together again.

The easiest path is the path of rivalry. It is easy because it is the default human choice. From Cain and Able to Jacob and Esau, rivalry has always been around. Now, when I say rivalry, I am not speaking of friendly rivalry; Michigan versus State; Coke versus Pepsi; or a rivalry that makes all parties better. What I am speaking about is the kind of take no prisoners, scorched earth, win at all costs rivalry. What I am speaking about is the demonizing of the other, and therefore we must destroy them kind of rivalry. What I am speaking about is the kind of rivalry that results in mutually assured destruction, where anger is unleashed and runs amuck. This is the kind of rivalry that destroys families, communities, nations and worlds. Even so, as I said, this is the easy choice because it is in some ways the pre-programmed choice buried within our DNA.

The more difficult path is reconciliation. It is more difficult because it is costly. It is costly to both the ones who have harmed others and to the ones who have been harmed. It is costly to the one who has harmed others because they have to admit that they have indeed harmed others, that they have been wrong, that they were inappropriate and by so doing they have to be open to both asking for forgiveness, whether or not that forgiveness comes. It is costly to the one who has been harmed because they have to be willing to accept the admission of guilt from the other, to set aside their anger and desire for revenge and to forgive. It is costly because reconciliation is more than simply dismissing what has happened, or pretending that no harm or hurt was done. It means acknowledging the depth of the pain and out of that pain, being open to the approach of the other.

So what are we going to do? Which will we, as Jesus' followers, choose?

If we are to believe the Apostle Paul, there is only one choice, reconciliation. The church in Corinth was a hot mess. It was a church that was divided in as many ways as a church could be divided; rich vs. poor, Peter followers vs. Apollos followers, Jew vs. Gentile. In Paul's first letter he deals with their

divisions and rivalries. He calls upon them to have the same mind and to be of one mind rather than being torn apart by the competition in the church for power. Unfortunately, these rivalries were not simply contained within the church. They extended to the relationship between the church and Paul, where they were critical of, or rivals with Paul. So in this second letter, Paul reminds the church members of their calling in Jesus Christ, which was to be agents of reconciliation. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (vs. 18). The logic for Paul works like this. We were estranged from God because our lives were not rightly lived. God loved us too much to allow us to be estranged, so he sent Jesus into the world to restore our relationship with God. Through Jesus costly work on the cross (there is the costly aspect of reconciliation) it became possible for us to be in right relationship with God once again. As Paul puts it, “...that is in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them...” (vs. 19). In Jesus, God reestablished a right relationship with us, and then sent us out with this message of reconciliation; a message of reconciliation not only with God but with one another. Our task then is to become those who work toward reconciliation and not rivalry...and fortunately the Jacob and Esau story offers us a template to use.

The first step in reconciliation, is for the one who has harmed or offended to attempt to freely bring the relationship back into the balance it was to have had all along; and in so doing be open to whatever response they might receive. Let me explain. Jacob and Esau were brothers. Jacob was the younger and Esau the older. As the older brother Esau was entitled to the birthright and blessing of his father. Jacob stole both of these through lies and deception; deceiving both his brother and his father. In essence Jacob had stolen the most precious inheritance Esau was to receive. So when Jacob begins his process of trying to reconcile with his brother, he acts to freely bring the relationship back into the balance it was to have had all along. We see this in Jacob bowing to Esau, thus giving Esau what was due to the elder brother. Then we watch as Jacob insists that Esau take from him gifts that Jacob had sent on ahead; gifts that would have been Esau’s had Jacob not stolen the blessing. And when Jacob initiates this process of reconciliation he does so without knowing how he will be received. He just knows it is the only Godly way forward.

The second step in reconciliation is for the one harmed to freely accept the appropriate rebalancing of the relationship; and in so doing complete the resetting of the relationship. This is what Esau does. Esau hears that his brother is coming back home. Esau has no reason to forgive him. In fact, Esau had pledged to kill his brother because of what he had stolen from him and by the customs of the day, he would have been right in so doing. Esau goes out with four-hundred armed men; enough to kill Jacob and take all that he had. Yet when he sees Jacob coming forward bowing, rebalancing the relationship, Esau embraces him instead of killing him and gives him the kiss of greeting. And even though Esau had more than enough, he receives from Jacob the gifts of animals and people that had been offered. He does so because he knows that that is what reconciliation demands. It must be costly, if it is to have meaning.

This is how reconciliation works; the one offending freely attempts to rebalance the relationship and the one offended accepts the rebalancing. What is interesting about the division in our country, and perhaps within our own families, is that in many cases people on both sides are both offenders and offended. So how do we reconcile? We do so by answering the last question of the second presidential debate. To say that debate was contentious would be an understatement. But then, at the end, a gentleman got up and asked this question. “Regardless of the current rhetoric, would either of you name one positive thing that you respect in one another?” Stunned, you could see the mental wheels turning in the candidates. Then they each offered a

compliment to the other and received the compliment offered. Then, they shook hands. Granted, the kind feelings only lasted till they got off stage. But it was a start. It was and is a model for what we are to do. For you see we are not called to agree with those who hold opposing social or economic views. We are not called to agree with someone else's choice of a leader or the values they espouse. But what we are called to do is to be agents of reconciliation; willing to initiate the process of healing by seeing in the other a child of God and seeking to rebalance human relationships regardless of our differences.

My challenge to you this morning then is this, to ask yourself, how am I being an agent of reconciliation in my circle of influence?