

Reflections

magazine

From The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas

Fall/Winter 2016



The Way of Reconciliation



Fall/Winter 2016

Using this issue as a resource for further study:

Because every issue of *Reflections* explores a single topic, the magazine lends itself to further study by individuals as well as small groups or Sunday morning classes.

The purpose of *Reflections* is not to give answers but rather to incite inquisitiveness. The writers and editor of *Reflections* hope the magazine's contents will inspire further exploration and reflection on each topic, especially as the topics relate to daily life. Look for "For further reflection" suggestions at the end of each article.

We invite your feedback. If you have comments on this issue or suggestions for future issues, send a note to Marjorie George, editor, email below.

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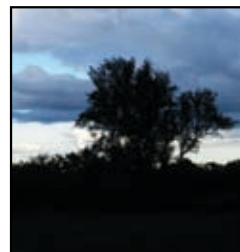
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What Is, and What Is Not

by Marjorie George

A friend was getting a divorce, one of the painful kind. “Don’t sign the papers,” her counselor cautioned her, “until you can walk away with a skip in your step, knowing you have done everything you can do and it’s time to move on.”

It’s the difference between giving up and surrender. Giving up says, “I quit.” Surrender says, “I accept.” I accept the circumstances of my life as it is today. I accept that I do not have the control over it that I thought I had. I accept that God is aware and walks with me.

To be sure, we are called and anointed and empowered to participate in the reconciliation of the world to God. But some things are beyond our power to affect and will only be brought to perfection on the other side when the Kingdom of God is fully realized.

In the faith journey of God’s people, we once believed that God’s favor toward us was revealed in the health, wealth, and happiness he poured upon us. Worldly struggles were to be overcome by working harder, seizing power where we could, resolving issues through battles to see who was bigger, stronger, and more wily. Our hope rested in our human abilities to stand strong and bulldoze our way forward. If life pushed in on us we pushed back, deadening the effects of the disappointments of our lives with the latest self improvement program or by working harder, drinking more, and popping those pain killers. Frequently we pointed out to God, to absolutely no effect, that quite frankly we thought we deserved better.

We were learning that the rocky road of the spiritual journey, for all of its joy, demands we face some hard truths, including that it’s not about me.

And the deeper we go into the journey, the more we learn to let go rather than acquire, to accept instead of rail against. The more we shed our illu-

sions that we are masters of our own fate, the more we realize that our residency is not of this world but of God’s kingdom where “thieves cannot break through and steal” our peace and our joy (see Matthew 6:20).

Yes it’s hard. Yes our hearts will break from time to time. Yes we will know disappointment, betrayal, injustice (It’s not fair! No, it’s not.) and crippling pain physically, emotionally and spiritually. We rightly work for reconciliation. Some circumstances in the world, in our society, in our relationships must be changed, but some situations are beyond our power to do so. The old serenity prayer asks for the wisdom to know the difference.

“Healthy religion,” says Richard Rohr, “is an enthusiasm about what is, not an anger about what is not.” When we accept that and “come to ourselves” we, like the Prodigal son (Luke 15:17-20), will turn toward home and find God hitching up his garments and running down the road to meet us.

R



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The Praying Church

by the Rev. James Derkits

In times of conflict, in times of great distress, go to the source for strength. Go to prayer. Learn the way of Jesus, and find ways to live his teachings.

This past summer it seems that every day the evening news brought us stories of more killings. Increasingly, I felt overwhelmed, sick, and helpless. But I also was pushed to pray. Since I could not turn back time and somehow save the senseless killing, the ripping apart of God's family, I invited people near to me to gather and pray for peace.

Then I felt another weight: how are we to pray for peace? I was frozen not by the need for peace and the end of senseless

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● The Praying Church

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For further Reflection

Well, do you spend at least as much time in prayer and scripture reading as you do watching or listening to news?

As you read the morning newspaper or watch the evening news, make it a practice to pray for those you learn about who are in need of God in their lives.



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killing, but by another ripping apart of God's family: the political climate in which we live. There is certainly no peace there. Public discourse rips us apart on a different level. It seems that the ones to whom we are to turn for governance are at such opposition, it led one musician to call them "Demo-Crips and Re-Bloodicans" referencing the gang-like mentality (Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp A Butterfly*). Would someone out there be offended if we pray for peace? What does peace even mean? Then I realized, we are not of that world. We are the church. We speak for a different kingdom, a kingdom whose mission is peace and reconciliation. A mission to restore all humanity to God.

I turned from there to others who have written about the quest to live the Peace of Christ in the midst of a terrorized world. Stanley Hauerwas wrote during the Cold War, regarding his church's stance on nuclear war. He said the reason Christians should promote peace has nothing to do with secular reasoning, nor even the hope of survival. Christians are not about survival; we follow Jesus Christ, who gave up his life in order to save. We are to promote peace because Christ has already saved us. Instead of looking to the world to find an alternative to war and fighting, the church is the alternative. Christians, followers of Christ, are to be the peaceful alternative (*The Hauerwas Reader* ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright, pg. 429.)

The Kingdom of God, of which we are citizens by our baptism, is about living the peace that Christ has already given us. So prayers for peace begin with prayers to live peace from the inside, where we have enthroned the King. There, from within, we might live out our baptismal covenant in the midst of our relationships. To live in the Kingdom of God is not to look outside to the world for

salvation, it is to live the salvation that we have already been given. We cannot turn to the capitol to find peace; we have to turn, time and time again, to Jesus as the source of peace, to live as resident aliens (to borrow from Hauerwas again) wherever we find ourselves in the world.

I am not advocating removing ourselves from society, as some monastic movements have modeled before us. I'm advocating for the more difficult task of being a reconciling presence wherever we find ourselves. Consider how much Good News you take in as compared to how much bad news, or simply secular news, you listen to, watch, or read. Is it at least balanced? Would you say you spend as much time in prayer or with the Scriptures as you do engaged in the 24-hour news cycle?

I'm not even advocating for listening exclusively to Christian radio or television; I'm advocating for going to the source, and going to church, participating in, and taking discipleship seriously, learning the way of Jesus, and finding ways to live his teaching.

At our prayer service this summer at Trinity by the Sea, we sat and prayed for the peace of Christ to well up within us, and then to help us to see the world as God sees it. Our police chief, members of our bishop's committee, faithful churchgoers, and strangers to the faith, for a moment, sat still with God in the kingdom. We sought leadership from the Holy Spirit, not institutional plans from government. We realized, in that moment, that Christ had already won the battle and has offered us a way of living in his kingdom that might spread peace person to person, relationship to relationship. The kingdom of God is not of this world, but through the church, it might be more realized in this world. *R*

Numbered Days

Reconciling with our own mortality is a work of the Christian community.

by the Rev. Mary Earle

Recently I had the tender privilege of accompanying a dear friend through almost five years of cancer treatment, then her decision to enter hospice and prepare for her death. She was an Episcopalian, someone whose parish life had been marked by weekly communion and the liturgical seasons.

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Photo: Storm clouds move in on a Texas summer afternoon. Captured by Dexter Lesieur.

● *Numbered Days*

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For years, her life had been intimately woven with the celebrations of Eucharist during Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and ordinary time. She had a keen awareness of the presence of the Risen Christ in and through all circumstances, at all times, rejoicing with us, and hallowing our dyings.

As with many of us, her time with cancer was challenging, to say the least. She suffered an astounding number of treatments, surgeries, and experimental protocols. From her depths, she was given the vitality to keep living, to savor her life, and to reach out to others. Over and over, despite the indignities that treat-

ment visited upon her, she said, with our Jewish brothers and sisters, “L’chaim! To life!”

And so, when it became apparent that the time had come for her to ease into hospice, she was aided in that decision by her parish. She was able to reconcile with her mortality.

We are encouraged by scripture and by our *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)* to take our mortality seriously, but also to hold it lightly.

Psalm 90:12 offers this line: “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.” Our *Book of Common Prayer* gives us this wisdom: “Make us, we pray, deeply aware of the shortness and uncertainty of human life; and let your Holy Spirit lead us in holiness and righteousness all our days...” (p. 504).

One of our highest callings as Christian communities of the sacramental, Episcopal type is to enter into this kind of reconciling process. All of us are heading Home at some point. All of us will be “received into the arms of mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light” (BCP p. 465).

I could go on and on, citing the wisdom offered to us with regard to our numbered days.

And yet, we live in a frenzied, shallow culture that is completely afraid of the fact of our dying. Advertising, online posts and no small number of magazine covers encourage us to carry unconscious assumptions that we will live forever and that illness and aging are signs that we have done something wrong.

It takes a community to counter this. A living, breathing, worshipping, singing, stepping out community. It takes the Body of Christ, enlivened by his own undying life and light, to sober us up and draw us away from the manipulations of mass media and superficial culture.

And so, when my dear friend accepted the fact that her body could no longer sustain treatment, and that she was being beckoned by Christ into a place of readiness, it was her community and her family that helped her be reconciled to her mortality. When she entered hospice, time shifted. No more urgent calls to the doctor. No more going to appointments. No more of the harsh demands of dealing with trying to keep going. Surrounded by family, she turned toward Home.

Her priests attended to her with care and kindness. Lay Eucharistic ministers brought communion for her and her family. Visitors came, when it was appropriate, to tell her stories and reflect on their time together as members of their lively community of faith and the happy remembrances of creating Advent wreaths and costumes for the Epiphany pageant. Her generosity was celebrated. Her kindness was remembered. And in all of this, the life of her community came to her house.

The gracious, abundant, overflowing sacramental life of the Body of Christ flowed from the altar, to her home, sloshing grace in the midst of sadness, gathering up familial memories and hallowing them with hymns sung together.

One of our highest callings as Christian communities of the sacramental, Episcopal type is to enter into this kind of reconciling process. All of us are heading Home at some point. All of us will be “received into the arms of mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light” (BCP p. 465).

When we are invited into the final days of another person, we are called to live out our baptismal vows, right there, in the midst of the dying. We seek and serve Christ, right there by the death bed. We respect the dignity of every human person, right there, as goodbyes are said and grief comes in tidal rushes. We proclaim the resurrection — not in any sappy, shallow way — but by offering the witness of the faith we have received, the faith that looks upon death with tender hope. This is the faith of those early Christians: Christ has risen from the dead, trampling down death by death. And we who are the members of his Body, right here, right now, don't offer our own fragile conjecture. We, as those who are heartened and fed and nourished and made new by every communion, stand with the community of saints and say, “Alleluia! Even at the grave we sing our song.” *R*

For further Reflection

Examine your thoughts about your own death or the death of someone you love. Do they proclaim resurrection?

How does your community support those who are nearing physical death? How might it?

Read the burial office in *The Book of Common Prayer*, pg 491.



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Reconciling with LIFE ITSELF

by Diane Thrush



The choices of life: Rage and rebel, become cynical and bitter, or accept and make peace.

Life throws things at us that give us a choice: rage and rebel, become cynical and bitter, or accept and make peace. To me such instances are reconciling with the quicksand of life we sometimes find ourselves in.

Author and sportswriter Dan Jenkins, who writes with true Texas grit and wit, calls it “life its own self.” The longer I am in this life, the more I am learning to live with and be at peace with life its own self. Control is just an illusion. Reconciliation happens when I begin to find acceptance and allow circumstances to become a part of the fabric of my spiritual journey with God’s help.

On February 17, 2011, my life changed in the twinkling of an eye. My husband fell and had a brain injury; he was taken to the hospital where he went directly to surgery. Gratefully, he recovered but was disabled physically. He was still Jimmy as we knew him, but he would never walk again. I remember sitting with my dear friend and crying after the doctor said it could take six months for him to return to normal.

How naïve I was. There never was normal again. I kept waiting, though, for him to return to normal. In fact, I learned a new term for what would become my new life story — “new normal.” It took me many months to realize life would never be the same. I had a new role in our marriage — caregiver. It was a role I didn’t want or ask for and at which I was not very good. I raged against it for a long time. I said it was the determination I had for him to “get well.” This wasn’t how I wanted our remaining years together to be.

But with the help of a spiritual guide and wonderful friends and family, I came to an acceptance that I could never have understood before the ac-

cident. Jimmy came to see February 17 as "the day he didn't die." Eventually I came to that place too. I made peace with and reconciled to my new role. I didn't love it, but it was an acceptance of the things I couldn't change.

Through this change, the one constant was a job that I loved — being a chaplain at Methodist Children's Hospital. I had a place to go every day and think about other things. I could feel fulfilled and find value in my day-to-day work. But in 2012, with the hospital under new management, I was forced into mandatory retirement. I quickly saw how much my work had been my life raft in the stormy sea. I had pictured myself working until I died! Retirement was not in my plans. Yet, here it was. I didn't know who I was without my work. Again, I was in the "rage or accept" place. What I have learned about myself is that I have to work through the rage to get to the acceptance.

There were some really rough places during that time. Yet, with spiritual guidance and love from others I began to make peace again with another "new normal" that I hadn't wanted or asked for. I had to learn to accept a life that included retirement as well as caregiving. It was a new step of allowing God to lead me into reconciling with life as it is, not as I wanted it to be.

Christmas of 2013 brought the sudden death of my husband. It wasn't even related to his accident. This has brought the most difficult change to my life. In addition to the many facets of grief, I was faced with such helplessness. Jimmy had taken care of the finances, the taxes, the house maintenance, and most of all, the technology. I didn't even know where to begin. How many times have I had to say to a technician "I don't know" when

asked a question about the house, car, yard, etc. Just last month, two and a half years after Jimmy's death, I found I needed to upgrade my phone. I didn't have a clue where to start. For the thousandth time I informed Jimmy he had no right to go and leave me in this helpless mess! At least the rage only lasted a day. As I laid myself at the mercy of AT&T, Apple, my children and grandchildren, I was reminded again how hard it is to lose a life partner.

We know what the big grief issues will be, but we are largely unaware of the little daily details of living with a person until we experience the loss of that person in those details. It is something that can't be understood by those who have not been there. Once more the refrain of reconciliation with what is directs my life.

Reconciliation to life and all it brings can be a gift from God if we allow it and weave it into our journey. Rage and anger go only so far, and in the end will be our destruction. But God will see us through to the acceptance of life its own self and the peace that accompanies it. The choice is ours: to allow it to happen or close ourselves off from it. *R*

For further Reflection

Make a list of the things in your life that you perceive as unfair, or problems that you think are insurmountable. What would it take for you to release these to God?

Think about where or to whom you can turn for help when you need it. What keeps you from doing that?

Who are the people God has placed in your path who might need your help? What can you do about that?



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Motives and *Intentions*

by Jennifer Wickham



The sociological theory of relational choice says people always choose what is in their best interest. How does that reconcile with the Christian understanding of sacrificial acts?

I was in graduate school when I was first introduced to the sociological theory of rational choice. Based in economic theory, it suggests that individuals are essentially motivated to make choices they believe to be in their best interest. To that end, people are always calculating and making decisions they think will somehow benefit them in some way.

Hard-core rational choice theorists will even go so far as to argue that there is no such thing as true altruism because even the most seemingly selfless acts are, at some level, self-motivated. This doesn't necessarily mean that people are selfish, but the theory argues that people do some form of cost-benefit analysis for every decision they make — and they ultimately decide to do the things which provide some benefit to them. Put another way: I wouldn't do anything truly sacrificial unless there was something in it for me.

The theory has a number of academic critics, but I am personally critical because I don't know how to reconcile it with the Christian message I've worked my whole life to absorb. The message of my faith asks me to take up my own cross daily. It wants me to give up my life for others. It implores me to turn the other cheek and forgive. I am to sit in the servant's place at the feet of others. Jesus didn't act in his own self-interest. Jesus is the ultimate example of self-sacrifice, and I want to live in the same way. All my life I have sought (with varying degrees of success) to follow this example fully.

If I am to be honest, I'm also a critic of this theory because it makes me supremely uncomfortable. I don't want to consider that my desire to imitate

Christ may be somehow self-serving. Ouch. What if a fearless moral inventory revealed that I secretly desire credit for my selfless actions? What about the warm, satisfied feeling I get when I do the right thing? Ouch ouch. Gratitude from others makes me feel good. My ego is stroked every time people compliment me for the charitable things I do. Ouch ouch ouch. Who am I beneath the works and words people see? What if I were discovered to be a fraud? These questions are thorns in my side.

I learned about Rational Choice Theory around the same time I became involved in a number of Episcopal projects in Haiti. My first trip there was six weeks after the 2010 earthquake, and it happened to correspond with Holy Week. I didn't know what I would see. I didn't know what it really meant to visit a place so frequently (and unfairly) reduced to being called "the poorest country in the Western hemisphere." While quantifiably accurate, Haiti is much more than a bunch of statistics about poverty, life-expectancy, political instability and deforestation. I didn't know how adequately to prepare, so I leaned even harder into my Lenten journey that year and asked God to help me see through the eyes of Jesus. I asked Christ to be my teacher and reveal himself to me in every person, smell, taste, and sight. I asked that I wouldn't flinch when something made me uncomfortable and that I would truly surrender myself and be present as he would have me be.

But then those troubling questions would creep into my thoughts. Are you REALLY doing this because Christ has called you? Are you secretly seeking some kind of re-

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● *Motives and Intentions*

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For further

Make your own examination of conscience. When you find that your motives for your actions are about you instead of God, confess that and move on.

Thomas Merton's famous prayer is available in many places, including online. Search for "Thomas Merton prayer," download it, print it out, and put it where you will see it every day.



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ward in Heaven for leaning so fully into your desire to be of service? Is all of this somehow motivated by an abstract desire for approval? Wouldn't people be proud of you to see you be such a bold example of Christ's love in the world? The thorns in my side would poke and puncture me at my most vulnerable moments, and it grieved me to confess during that Holy Week that there might be some element of truth within every single twinge I felt. It was one of the hardest experiences of my life, and I am convinced that the wrestling I did that week changed me more than the experience itself did.

All these years later, I am still actively involved in Episcopal ministries in Haiti, and I continue to travel there frequently. I'm currently employed as a development coordinator for one of the Diocese of Haiti's many worthwhile ministries. I don't believe I will ever fully reconcile the Christ-likeness I seek with the humanness I possess, but I am certain that this continued internal wrestling will be one of the great works of my life.

One of Thomas Merton's most famous prayers says,

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire."

"I believe the desire to please you does, in fact, please you." Isn't that a wonder-

ful thought? God is able to see past my sinfulness and selfishness and see the true desires of my heart. My intent is to be an authentic child of God, and I pray that God sees this desire in spite of all the times I may really be seeking my own gain. The truth is, I sometimes worry about this so much that I get tangled up in my own self-analysis. It could paralyze me if I let it. But I keep moving. The questions — the thorns — keep me honest. They keep me focused and just uncomfortable enough to ensure that my dependence remains upon God and not on anything else. I keep walking the path as it unfolds before me, and I pray that God will increase as I decrease. I seek to reconcile these things within myself because I seek to reconcile myself to God. That is a process that will last a lifetime. I am, as a friend once said, "working out my salvation." May it ever be thus.

R

A Walk in the Park

Paul says we are given the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18). What is our obligation to bring about reconciliation between others, even in the most ordinary of circumstances?



by Fran Torres-Lopez

One of the many challenges we all face is learning what it means to live out our faith on a daily basis in the myriad of circumstances in which we find ourselves.

I notice that if I am not careful, this challenge can feel overwhelming and begin to get the better of me. I hear about many troubling things in our world that need reconciling: racial tension, war, environmental destruction, poverty, even battles over faith doctrine. The challenges seem so big that at times it can feel as if the only sane response is apathy.

But then I am called back by good teachers and a cloud of witnesses.

I am called back when the Rev. Dr. Jane Patterson leads a Sunday formation class where she teaches that reconciliation between God and neighbor is part of our mission.

I am called back when the Rev. Carol Morehead preaches a sermon encouraging us to stretch beyond ourselves as we respond to the situations in our world requiring reconciliation.

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● *A Walk in the Park*

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Once my vision is steadied on our mission of reconciliation I am further guided when I hear the Rev. Beth Knowlton end her sermon with the words of Emily Dickinson:

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

The guidance continues when I recall Mother Theresa's words: "Do small things with great love."

I thought about the larger reconciling that needs to occur in the world, and in that moment it all seemed related. If any one of us, even on a small level is not reconciled, then through our connection as humans we all suffer.

All of these teachings culminate into a very small, soft question for me:

"How can I help today?"

This was the question on my mind when I was on vacation this past summer. My wife and I were celebrating our anniversary with our two sons, and part of that celebration included a day at Fiesta Texas.

The weather was hot, and I recall enjoying the coolness of the wave pool as I looked up at the beautiful sky and wondered, "How can I help today?"

This felt like a subtle but sincere question I put to God, like a child wondering, not really expecting an answer.

At one point during the day I waited at a table with our younger son while my wife and our older son went to ride the Gully Washer. I stood at the table watching as a mother and her son inserted a quarter into a machine that sprays water on people at the push of a button. They inserted the quarter then stepped aside to watch for the right time to spray the water. Then in the next moment another woman walked by, pushed the button, and kept on walking.

The first mother and her son looked in disbelief at what the woman had done. I was shocked, too, but then decided the second woman probably did not realize someone else was already using the machine. My assumption was she was simply in a playful mood and unthinkingly walked by and pushed the button.

I watched the first mother and her son as I heard her make the accusatory statement: "That woman owes me a quarter!" The mother told her son to go tell the woman what happened, but he would not.

In that moment the idea of reconciliation entered my mind. It seemed to me the mother and her son might hold some bitterness in their hearts. I recognized anger in response to injury.

I thought about the larger reconciling that needs to occur in the world, and in that moment it all seemed related. If any one of us, even on a small level, is not reconciled then through our connection as humans we all suffer.

So I walked over to the woman who had pushed the button and gently explained what happened. She seemed shocked

and confused. I did not want to offend her so I said, "I don't think you did it on purpose. I figure you didn't realize but I just wanted to let you know." Then she said to me, "Well, honey, I will give you another quarter." I said, "Oh no, it's not my quarter. It belonged to that little boy in the grey shirt."

The woman walked over, talked to the little boy, gave him a quarter, and then began talking with his mother. The two women stood close to each other, talking and laughing almost as if they knew one another. Tears welled up as I witnessed the first mother's disposition change from anger to a sort of camaraderie. The women were now reconciled.

As she moved away, the woman who pushed the button stopped to thank me for explaining what happened.

In all of these things, I feel very childlike and inexperienced. I do not know what I am doing, and I have many flaws. Yet it is my simple understanding that God wants to use us to help in this project of reconciliation despite our many flaws and shortcomings.

I am thankful I have small opportunities in which I can practice — opportunities that allow me to see what it can look like for two strangers to be reconciled instead of polarized.

In the midst of my vacation, another teacher posted a prayer on Facebook by Brother Roger who is the founder of the Taizé Community. This prayer keeps me company as I continue to live into our mission of reconciliation:

O Risen Christ,

You breathe your Holy Spirit on us

*and you tell us: 'Peace be yours'.
Opening ourselves to your peace
— letting it penetrate the harsh
and rocky ground of our hearts —
means preparing ourselves to be
bearers of reconciliation wherever
you may place us.*

*But you know that at times we
are at a loss.*

*So come and lead us to wait in
silence, to let a ray of hope shine
forth in our world.*

R

For further Reflection

How might you decide when you encounter situations of conflict whether you should intervene or stay silent?

Where is God asking you to speak peace into a situation? Will that take words, actions, or prayers?

How hard is it for you to accept that you are called to be a "minister of reconciliation"?



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Diversity, Change, and Reconciliation

In 2010, the Diocese of West Texas adopted a Core Purpose to “Be Jesus’ Witnesses” along with five Core Values to guide us in living out our Core Purpose. The fifth Core Value is “Reconciliation.” Practicing reconciliation means accepting diversity and change in our own lives and in our relationships within our families, our congregations, and across the entire Church.

Living out our Core Values and Purpose as a diocese and as the Church means being deeply committed to the value and practice of reconciliation. We know as Christians that seeking a reconciled relationship with God, overcoming our sinful nature, has to be a priority.

But are we as focused on and aware of the critical importance of reconciling our broken relationships with fellow parishioners, fellow members of our diocese, the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Communion, the Church Universal, and brothers and sisters of other faith traditions, and even atheists and agnostics – i.e. “all people”? Reconciliation is critically important to fulfilling our Purpose and

by the Rev. Robert Woody

Core Values because of the reality of both diversity and change.

God loves diversity. God’s Creation is incredibly diverse. Even identical twins grow up differently and follow different paths. Life would be so much simpler if we all were painted with the same brush — if we all looked the same, acted the same, thought the same, and experienced life in the same way – and it would be incredibly boring. God’s diversity requires love. And love requires reconciliation.

God also loves evolution and change. The prophets and Jesus were sent by God not to take

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Our Core Values:

Faith

We pattern our lives on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Scripture, Prayer, and Sacramental Worship

We are grounded in Scripture, prayer, and sacramental worship.

Evangelism

We proclaim, by word and example, God's saving love revealed in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

Mission

We reach beyond ourselves to serve all people in our communities and throughout the world.

Reconciliation

We are a community committed to living in reconciled relationship with God and all people.

Our Core Purpose:

Be Jesus' Witnesses



● *Change, Diversity, and Reconciliation* from page 19

us backwards, but to lead us forward. Change and evolution are always challenging and difficult and can cause different perspectives and even disagreement, conflict, polarization, and segregation. We cannot survive change and evolution without love and reconciliation.

In the midst of this diversity, and in the culture of change in which we find ourselves, we frequently have to consider what we should hold on to and what we must let go of. For instance, in liturgy do we hold onto Rite I and the traditional

communities with whom we disagree on many challenging issues?

Reconciliation does not mean “conversion.” The point of reconciliation is not for one side to successfully convert the other. Reconciliation means, in times of change and controversy, to be willing to listen respectfully to one another, be willing to agree to disagree, and be willing to experiment on often difficult and controversial issues, such as interpretation of Scripture, styles of worship, models of

church structure, social justice focus, etc., so that we can continue to walk together on the more important principles of loving God, loving one another, and loving our neighbors.

The “Body of Christ” cannot function without the practice of reconciliation among its diverse members. If we can only work together with those who agree with us on all the issues

we consider important, then the “Body of Christ” is no longer a body. The diverse hands and feet and eyes and toes aren’t working together on a larger scale, and therefore, they cannot have a major impact on the world.

Here’s an example of practicing reconciliation within our diocese: About five years ago, when the issues around homosexuality and the blessing of same-sex



hymns of the 19th century? Should we continue in the traditional model of church that seems to be shrinking and crumbling and is often unattractive to most of our kids and grandkids and their peers? What parts of the traditional model should we let go of?

And as we face diversity and change, how do we bring about reconciliation with those within our families and faith

unions were causing anxiety and division within our diocese, I could feel the tension among our sister parishes in the Northeast section of San Antonio — Church of Reconciliation, St. David's, Church of Resurrection, and St. Matthew's. So we decided to invite these diverse parishes to come together in the celebration of Holy Week. Each parish hosted one Holy Week service, and another planned and provided the clergy, lectors and lay Eucharistic ministers. We worshiped and broke bread together on each other's campuses, heard a variety of sermons, and experienced a diversity of liturgical practices. We still have very different perspectives on some difficult issues, but we love one another and know we can, despite our differences, work together as the Body of Christ.

At our 2013 Diocesan Council, Bishop Lillibridge encouraged parishes "to engage in a prayerful, careful, and intentional conversation about homosexuality" (Bishop's Address 2013, par. 39). And, if there was not a diversity of perspectives within a parish, the bishop asked them to come together with other parishes to create a diversity of perspectives "so that we aren't simply creating 'councils of the like-minded'" (Bishop's Address 2013, par. 42). He also requested that the Reconciliation Commission prepare a format for facilitated conversations and be a resource for guiding the conversations.

The group of Northeast San Antonio parishes, which had begun collaborating on Holy Week, were the first parishes in the diocese willing to come together for facilitated conversations about homosexuality. The first conversation was in November of 2013. At the second conversation, in January of 2014, two more parishes, St. Paul's and St. George, joined us. These conversations were so successful that Bishop Lillibridge asked the Reconciliation Commission to plan and facilitate similar conversations at our 2014 Diocesan Council, which were also very successful.

Although there is still a diversity of opinions within our diocese on these issues, because of these successful, intentional conversations — which helped to promote reconciliation within and among our congregations — when Bishop Lillibridge did grant permission to a few parishes to bless same-sex unions, our diocese did not fracture or split.

As we move forward into an increasingly diverse and rapidly changing world, we, as followers of Christ, as diverse congregations, as the Diocese of West Texas, as the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Communion and the Body of Christ, are called to continue to intentionally pursue and practice reconciliation. *R*



The Rev. Robert Woody is rector of Church of Reconciliation in San Antonio TX and previous chair of the diocesan Reconciliation Commission. Reach him at Robert@cor-satx.rr.com.

For further Reflection

Consider the five diocesan core values and the core purpose. Do these guide your life and the life of your congregation?

The core values are available on a full-color 5" x 7" card. If you would like a copy, send an email to marjorie.george@dwtx.org with your name and mailing address. They are also available on the diocesan website at www.dwtx.org/about-the-diocese/core-values/

To what extent are you pro-active in being a person or a community committed to living in reconciled relationship with God and all people?

Forgive God? But God is supposed to forgive us. The idea was unthinkable, until she did.

Forgiving God

I was well into my second trimester when we lost the baby. We were relaxing at home on a Sunday afternoon when the cramping began. Before we'd even received a call back from the doctor, a tiny baby boy was born. Stillborn, into our hands, his body perfectly formed in every way.

The following days were filled with shock, then a profound sadness overcame us. We had so wanted a sibling for our three-year-old son, Nathaniel, and I'd already had a miscarriage before we lost this baby, whom we'd named Isaiah. Was this not in God's plan for our family? How were we to go on from here? I wasn't inclined to ask, "Why me?" because even if God had given me an answer, there would never have been a reason good enough to justify taking my son. Up until now, I had trusted God with the safety of my loved ones. Now I was learning that their safety wasn't guaranteed, and perhaps wasn't even God's concern.

We moved on with our lives. I continued to take Nathaniel to play dates and story times and playgrounds and Sunday School. I started to notice

by Julie Raymond Chalk

how many other mothers were in these places, pregnant mothers, and mothers with newborns as well as children Nathaniel's age with siblings to play with. I was growing bitter. I was finding it more and more difficult to be around families with young children. A seed of envy started to grow in the angry soil of my heart. I started asking God, "Why have you blessed their families and not ours?" Becoming more resentful, it became harder to buy those requisite shower gifts, take the meals over after the birth, and even congratulate the new parents.

About a year later I was attending a women's retreat in our diocese. The theme was healing, and I was sitting alone in one of the break-out sessions, listening to a talk about forgiveness. Suddenly, I felt God speaking to me: "Do you realize that the unforgiveness in your heart is against me?" Was this really God asking me to forgive him? Wasn't it supposed to be me asking for his forgiveness? After all, that's what I'd always been taught. I hadn't even confessed the resentment, bitterness, and lack of trust which had grown into a thriving plant inside me.

But somehow, in that moment, I realized that God does care about us, our pain, our families, and our losses. God was asking me to forgive him for



something he'd allowed but that I didn't understand. I'd felt betrayed, and this was an opportunity to be reconciled with the God I had known and loved for most of my life. I didn't want to lose my relationship with him. And by not forgiving him for allowing this loss in my life, I had permitted a bitterness to grow that was poisoning not just my relationship with him but with everyone else too.

That day I chose to forgive God. I also asked for his forgiveness for allowing my resentment to grow between us. After the retreat, I returned to my life and daily routine. A couple of weeks later, I realized that my feelings of bitterness were gone. I had been able to rejoice with my friend who'd just had a new baby. I no longer avoided the library and playgrounds where young children hung out with their parents. In addition, I found out that I was pregnant again.

Early the next year, our daughter, Naomi, was born. And, while that pregnancy was filled with the normal worries, I was thankful for each day I had with my unborn child.

Now that my children are grown, I still treasure each day that I have with them, knowing that each moment spent with a loved one is truly a gift. My experience of reconciling with God after he allowed our son to die was a springboard to gratitude for everything he provides and does for us. And I've been grateful ever since. *R*

For further Reflection

If you have never considered forgiving God, think about if that is something you need to do.

Think carefully about the author's words of God "allowing" this situation to enter her life. How does that differ from blaming God?

For what are you grateful today?



Julie Chalk is a geriatric social worker who lives in Canyon Lake and attends St. Francis by the Lake. She is also one of the facilitators for Community of Hope in her parish. Reach her at jfrchalk@gmail.com.

Reconciling with our *Past*



by the Rev. Canon Omar Pitman

Too often our lives are filled with regrets for choices made and not made. Less often do we remember that God not only forgives and forgets our mistakes, he also redeems them when we ask.

There are things that I have said and done in my life, some many years ago, that have come back to haunt me. I may have confessed them and received God's forgiveness ("If we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" I John 1:9). And when God forgives our sins, He forgets them ("And their sins and offenses I will remember no more" Hebrews 10:17).

However, while God may not remember, all those words and actions are stored in the personal computer of my mind and just the touch of a button — a word, an image, a sound, a person — can bring them up sharply on the screen of my psyche. That is when I realize that I have forgotten the promise of redemption, and I am reminded of it when I make my confession in the presence of a priest ("The Lord has put away all your sins." *The Book of Common Prayer*, page 448).

Now on the one hand, the memory of those words and deeds and the pain they caused, like spurs against the flanks of a horse, may goad me to run the race toward spiritual maturity; on the other hand they may just as well send me racing to depressive thoughts of guilt over my “failures.” The latter focuses mournfully on self and what I have done or left undone rather than joyfully on what God has done, and is doing, in my life. Such thinking leads only to despair and defeat (which is the goal of our spiritual enemy) rather than to spiritual growth and maturity, which is God’s plan for our life.

The choices we have made in the past, including our mistakes, are very much a part of who we are. They have been part of forming our personality and our character. How we have subsequently dealt with them has also impacted us. If they have become a burden or a stumbling block to our peace or our spiritual growth then we must overcome their negative impact. Because they are an indelible part of our life — our personal history — they are immutable and we can do nothing to change them. A major first step in developing spiritual maturity is acceptance of things which we cannot change. Spiritual growth involves, among other things, being able to, in the words of a well-known prayer, “accept the things we cannot change.”

Having accepted the reality that these events are an integral part of who we are, we can then use them as building blocks in our spiritual development. They can be an instrument for measuring our spiritual growth.

Just because our past is an indelible part of who we are does not mean it is all of who we are. We are continually undergoing change. The best evidence of this fact is our bodies themselves. Just look at old photographs of yourself and then look in the mirror. It is the same person but there has been change.

What is true of our body is also true of our psyche. What we observe on the outside is also true on the inside, though we cannot so easily see it. We are blinded by our unrealistic but deep-seated (and completely un-Christian) belief that people do not change. But they do, on the inside as well as the outside. Why else would God have sent His Son into His fallen creation and what, after all, is the Church all about?

We have regrets about our past and that alone is evidence that we have changed on the inside. But if we dwell in the past and indulge ourselves with a kind of egocentric wallowing in our regret, we miss a wonderful opportunity for spiritual growth.

Our ultimate goal as Christians is a level of spiritual maturity that enables us to be one with God so that we can understand His creation and His creatures from His perspective. We do this by spending time with Him — lots of time. There really is no substitute for that, no quick fix. As we spend time with Him and think about our past, we can begin to see our “failures” for what they really are — painful lessons in our development of life skills. If we cannot view them in this way then whatever pain they may have caused us or others is only made worse.

Our past is real, an indelible part of who we are and cannot be changed; but through a gracious and ever-deepening relationship with a loving God it can be redeemed and serve as an instrument for developing our spiritual maturity.

R

For further Reflection

In her book *The Gift of Years*, author Joan Chittester says of regret for past choices: “Regret claims to be insight. But how can it be spiritual insight to deny the good of what has been for the sake of what was not? . . . [Regret] fails to understand that there are many ways to fullness of life, all of them different, all of them unique.”

Discuss that with trusting friends or a small group.



The Rev. Canon Omar Pitman is a retired priest of the diocese. In the Diocese of West Texas he has served at St. Luke’s, San Antonio, and with the Central Convocation Partners in Ministry in San Antonio.



Prepare the Way

An online study
of Isaiah's
prophecies
on the coming of Christ

by Bishop Gary Lillibridge

- Bishop Gary Lillibridge leads this study on Isaiah's foretelling of the coming of Christ. Lessons will be posted on the four Sundays in Advent and will be in text and audio format.
- In addition, our Advent study will include links to other offerings available across the diocese and the Episcopal Church.
- Users may also receive a short, daily Advent message that will be sent by text to subscribers.
- To sign up for the study, go to www.christianformation-dwtx.org and subscribe.
- For the daily text, send an email with your cell phone number and carrier to Marjorie George at marjorie.george@dwtx.org.

Starts November 27

find it at
www.christianformation-dwtx.org



More spiritual formation resources are available from Adult Christian Formation, online at www.christianformation-dwtx.org.

On the site you will find **Bible studies**, **topical studies**, and **seasonal studies** that are suitable for small groups, individuals, and Sunday morning congregational studies.

The Sacramental Rite of Reconciliation

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (II Cor. 5:19).

This piercing truth falls within one of Scripture’s most beautifully soaring passages, II Corinthians 5. It becomes the source of our Church’s primary missional claim: “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ (Catechism, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p.855). It articulates broadly how the Incarnation is the singular movement of God’s reconciling love into a sinful and alienated world, and how Jesus’ life and ministry embodies this divine movement.

Reconciliation is the on-going work of the Holy Spirit within and out from the Church — we are entrusted with God’s reconciling love in Jesus Christ. We are to give as generously as we have received, participating in the Spirit’s labor of love that is reconciliation. Clearly, we have been called to difficult and costly work. The essays and stories in this issue show that anger, pride, and pain are stubborn and powerful within us and in the world around us. But it’s hard to think of an instance when Jesus concludes a command with, “...if you feel like it.”

Our Prayer Book contains a grace-filled pattern for this kind of life together in the rite of The Reconciliation of a Penitent (pp. 447-452). Episcopalians tend to be skittish of “private confession” for pretty good historical reasons. But as often happens, we throw out treasure with the trash, and the rite is little used. The Anglican mantra holds true: sacramental confession is “necessary for some, beneficial for all, required of none.”

Still, this short liturgy illuminates God’s relentless desire for reconciliation, intensely personalizes it, and offers us a healthy spiritual discipline as we seek to be reconciled and to become reconciling followers of Jesus. I commend it to you, whether with a priest or in your personal prayers. If you want “authenticity” in your spiritual life, here it is.

by the Rt. Rev. David M. Reed

Imbedded in the rite is St. Paul’s claim that, in Christ, “we regard no one from a human point of view.” The perspective is God’s. The priest is present almost as a “third-party” sitting in with God and the penitent. The priest is not judge and jury, but a fellow sinner in need of mercy and grace. Allusions to the parable of the Prodigal Son are woven throughout, and the language is of forgiveness, loving-kindness, restoration and starting anew. There’s no shying away from the reality of our sins and the damage done, but even more important is the breath-taking declaration that, in Christ, sin no longer owns and defines us.

We are set free to receive forgiveness and reconciliation and to practice that in our lives. “Now there is rejoicing in heaven,” we are told, “for you were lost, and are found; you were dead, and are now alive in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

And that’s the amazing grace we love to sing about.



The Rt. Rev. David Reed is bishop coadjutor of the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas.

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