

The Ministry of Reconciliation

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
Augustana Lutheran Church
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The verses following the Second Reading from 2nd Corinthians continue to describe what the new creation in Christ looks like. They read:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ....

2 Corinthians 5:18-20

Seeing from God's point of view compels us to seek reconciliation in our human relationships, for that is what God in Christ has done for us.

What does reconciliation mean? The dictionary gives six meanings, two of which speak very directly to the Biblical use of that word. They are "to bring into harmony," and "to restore." The Lord God Almighty has brought us back into harmony with him through Christ Jesus, and we are given the ministry of seeking holy harmony in our relationships.

Such an orientation calls us to refrain from judging people by outward appearances – social status, economic class, national origin, level of education, home address, length of days, length of hair, or any other human measurement. Because of Christ Jesus, we are to see people in a new way, just as Christ sees us in a new way. As we read earlier, "We regard no one from a human point of view" (2 Cor. 5:16).

Last Sunday, Pastor Pederson said in his sermon, "Now I am living by the righteousness of God. And that is, first of all, nothing more than being here in a new way and enjoying it." Since God gives us holy righteousness as a gift, "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). I am not implying that it is easy to slough off judgments and prejudices that come with our human experiences, nor am I saying that seeing all of life through the eyes of faith and reconciliation is as appealing as a hot fudge sundae. Only the love of Christ makes such a divine perspective possible in our earthly journey.

Most of know of Nelson Mandela of South Africa. I recently read Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Made a Nation by John Carlin, in which he describes the wisdom, patience, skill, and determination of Nelson Mandela. I do not want to make this sermon just a book review, but I do want to tell you a bit about the contents.

Nelson Mandela was arrested and in 1962 was sent to the Robben Island Prison for violating apartheid rule in South Africa. His confinement was brutal, but he never gave up his faith and vision. Throughout his confinement he remained in communication with the people of the African National Congress, encouraging them in their quest for justice. He was finally released after 27 ½ years of incarceration at the age of 71; that was in 1990.

The day after his release, he held a news conference. Among the comments made, he said, “Despite the hard times in prison, we had also the opportunity to think about programs...and in prison there have been men (he meant guards and other prison staff) who are very good, in the sense that they understood our point of view, and they did everything to try and make you as happy as possible. That...has wiped out any bitterness that a man could have” (this quote and all others that will be noted are from the book by Carlin, this one p. 85). Can you imagine, 27 ½ years in prison without being convicted and in conditions we would call inhumane? No bitterness!

He also reiterated his vision: “reconciling white fears with black aspirations” (p. 85). That was his calling, his mission, his purpose in life.

Mandela saw one of the means to achieve this end would be sport. Sport was for the Afrikaners not just a game, it was politics, for South African teams traveled to other nations and served as sort of ambassadors for the government. South African business gave large financial sponsorship for rugby and in return received huge tax breaks. All worked together, Nelson Mandela said, as “the opium that kept whites in happy ignorance; the opium that numbed white South Africa” (p. 66).

In his vision, he saw how the game of rugby and its place in So. African society could be the means to deal with the ravages of apartheid and provide an experience of healing, of reconciliation.

He was elected President of So. Africa in February of 1994, and inaugurated on May 10, 1994. Those that govern the international level of rugby competition had already decided that the 2005 Rugby World Cup competition would be hosted by So. Africa, and many in and outside of So. Africa wondered if it would still be possible. Under Mandela’s leadership it did happen; he used the competition as a way to teach and lead his nation to the goal of reconciliation.

So. Africa’s team was all white except for one mixed race player. Instead of insisting that the team be composed of a greater racial balance proportionate to the population, Nelson Mandela simply said to the whole nation, “These boys are our boys now, let us embrace them” (p. 190). Not all were thrilled to hear this statement, but he persisted in his call. The So. African team was called The Springboks – or Boks, for short. As you no doubt know, the Springbok is a small gazelle found in So. Africa. Since the team traditionally was all Afrikaners, it was identified with the apartheid system. So it’s easy to understand why the blacks would not respond warmly to Mandela’s statement, “These boys are our boys now, let us embrace them.”

At a subsequent rally of his political party, the ANC, Mandela introduced the phrase, "One Team, One Country" (p. 172), and then he put on his head a Springbok cap, a cap that bore the symbol of the team, and to his audience that day a symbol of apartheid, of white supremacy rule. Those present booed. He continued speaking his theme of reconciliation, "One Team, One Country," and by the end had quitted the booing and gained their hearing.

In the Rugby World Cup play, So. Africa kept winning and advancing into the championship game against the best team in the world, the All Blacks from New Zealand, called the All Blacks, because their uniforms are all black. No one gave the Boks from So. Africa a chance. The game was played on June 25, 1995.

The blacks of So. Africa always cheered for the team that was playing against the Springboks of So. Africa. But on this day, following the lead of their new president and his vision for So. Africa, many wore Springbok caps as they had seen Nelson Mandela do. Nelson Mandela himself wore his Springbok cap and a Springbok green and gold jersey bearing the number 6, the same number worn by the team's captain. Five minutes before the start of the game, Nelson Mandela stepped onto the field dressed in his cap and jersey in front of a crowd of about 65,000 the vast majority of whom were white Afrikaners. He went to the middle of the field to shake hands with the players. When he stepped onto the field, the crowds "seemed to go dead still" (p. 221). They could not believe their eyes. A black So. African wearing the Springbok symbol. "Then a chant began, low at first, but rising quickly in volume and intensity. One of those in attendance said, "I could not make out what was going on, what the people were chanting... Then I made out the words. This crowd of white people, as one man, as one nation were chanting, 'Nel-son, Nel-son, Nel-son'. I don't think I'll ever experience a moment like that again. It was a moment of magic, a moment of wonder. This man was showing that he could forgive, totally, and now they – the rugby white South Africa – showed in that response to him that they, too, wanted to give back" (p. 221-222).

John Carlin's assessment is stated his reflection in theological language: "this crowd of Afrikaners shouting 'Nel-son, Nel-son' were acknowledging their sin, uncorking their bottle-up guilt. Nelson Mandela's donning the green and gold of the Springboks standing on the field with the players was saying, 'We forgive you for the past'" (p. 222).

There, in one amazing snapshot of experience, was reconciliation being enacted as God wills. Or as Paul writes, "We regard no one from a human point of view... there is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:16-17). The will and work of the Lord was expressed in the leadership of Nelson Mandela as he tried to unite a very divided nation and make them all "One Team, One Nation." By the way, the Springboks defeated the All Blacks in overtime.

Obviously, this did not nor does it even today solve all of So. Africa's problems and issues, but it avoided what millions in So. Africa and around the world feared: a bloodbath.

Hate, fear, prejudice are powerful driving forces and demonstrate the tremendous need for reconciliation – to bring into harmony, to restore. Correspondent Mara Schiavocampo's column last Wednesday began, "On a recent Saturday afternoon, hate was on the march in St. Louis. About 85 members of the National Socialist Movement, the nation's largest neo-Nazi group, gathered in the shadow of the famed Gateway Arch for a march and rally celebrating its 35th anniversary... Critics say that groups like this are the faces of homegrown hate... As shocking as their views are, groups like this are more popular than ever. The Southern Poverty Law Center has been tracking hate groups for almost 30 years. In its spring 2009 Intelligence Report, they found that 926 hate groups are currently operating in the US, an all-time high" (MSNBC.com, June 10, 2009).

The need for reconciliation as a gift from the Lord Jesus Christ to each of us remains crucial as does the need for reconciliation among us – all of us. No easy task. "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and who has given us the ministry of reconciliation...we are ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:18-20). Amen.