

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, March 14, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"THE OPEN DOOR OF RECONCILIATION"

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

In Psalm 133:1 the Psalmist writes, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" And it's even more wonderful when it happens after you have been divided from someone for some reason. You have peace and joy in your heart and a feeling of relief. The world seems right again. If that kind of reconciliation has ever happened to you it's almost like a miracle. Perhaps it is a miracle, because God always seems to be involved when it happens. In fact, reconciliation is God's work. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:18, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." One helpful picture of reconciliation is that of building bridges between two separated persons. But recently I have been picturing reconciliation as opening a door for someone to walk through. And the Bible teaches that God opens the door of reconciliation. It's all from God, says Paul. God opens the door of reconciliation.

First, God opened the door for us to be reconciled to God.

What causes religious feelings and thoughts to arise in humans? There are two sources, I think. One is a sense of awe at this vast, mysterious universe, at life itself and a desire to worship the One who created it all. The other is a sense that we are somehow distant from our Creator God. This sense of estrangement goes right back to Adam and Eve in the Garden, when they disobeyed God's word and tried to hide from God. They even tried to cover their nakedness with fig leaves in order to regain that close relationship they had when they walked with God in the cool of the evening. From Adam and Eve we all inherited a sense of estrangement from God caused by our sin, a sense that was made even deeper when we tried but failed to keep the Ten Commandments. We also inherited a desire from them to restore our relationship with God.

So humans try harder to keep the rules and to do good works and pretty ourselves up and make ourselves acceptable to God. But it never quite works. God who is holy and righteous cannot be close to people whose sin still shows. By our own efforts we are always left outside, banging on the door to no avail. On our own we would be outside forever. We would perish.

But the Gospel tells us that God has opened the door from his side. It started right after Adam and Eve's sin when God killed an animal in their presence, took away their fig leaves and covered them with animal skins. Though their sin would have ongoing consequences for themselves, for the human race and for creation, they were now forgiven by God, back in close relationship with Him again. God didn't look at their sin; he looked at those animal skins which covered their sin.

God now began to open the door for the whole human race. God chose a people, Israel, through whom he began the process. Eventually through Israel came God's only Son. And in Christ God completed his work of opening the door of reconciliation for us and for all. "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." (Vs. 19) And Paul tells us how God finally completed his project of opening the door. Verse 21 - "For our sake he made him who knew no sin to be sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus always had that close, intimate relationship with the Father that we humans had been striving for. The Father was always well pleased with his Son. He obeyed where Adam had not. So what did God do? God allowed his beloved and perfect Son to become sin for us, so that we could be covered by Christ's righteousness. Our sin for his perfection. It was the great exchange.

Do you ever notice that when you enter a room with a strong odour, that odour somehow gets into your clothes and may stick with you for hours after you come out of that room? Sometimes you even have to send the clothes to the dry cleaners. Jesus came all the way into this world and though he was without sin, he took upon himself the very stench of human sin. And when he died on the Cross, the power of sin to forever separate us from God died, too. It was sheer love and sheer grace. When Jesus died, the huge curtain in the Temple was torn in two. The work from God's side had been accomplished. God had opened the door of reconciliation for us all. Now we can stand before God and have God say, "You are fragrant to me, sinless in my sight, covered with the perfection of my Son. I am your Father, and you are my beloved child forever." In Jesus God opened the door for us to be reconciled to God. "All this is from God, who reconciled himself to us through Christ." That's Gospel.

But here is the second thing to see. There is an important condition here for this to be all true in all lives, for our reconciliation with God to be complete. **The condition is that we have to accept the gift of reconciliation.** Paul says that as an ambassador for Christ, his message to people is, "We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (Vs 20)

Now this doesn't mean for a moment that the task of opening the door falls

back upon us. It simply means "be reconciled to God by accepting the gift." Some people refuse to believe that the door of reconciliation is open. They can't believe that God is so loving and gracious that he has opened the door himself. They think they must work harder, find the right button or handle to open the door themselves. They remain outside, where eventually they perish, forever separated from God.

A few decades ago, some Japanese soldiers were found hiding out in the jungles of Indonesia, some 30 years after the end of World War Two. They hadn't heard that the war had ended and they were still in fighting mode. In fact, some refused to believe the good news and chose to remain out in the jungle. They wouldn't come in, and presumably y died out there. Some people still think the war with God is still on. They're still fighting against God, trying to beat down the door. But the Gospel proclaims that in Christ God has opened the door of reconciliation for us. And it's propped open by a Cross. Paul says, "be reconciled to God." Stop fighting and enter into the peace God offers. Believe that the door is already open and walk through it into a reconciled and eternal relationship with God. And the way, the only way you walk through the open door is by putting all your faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Paul says that "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation, everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (Vs. 17)

Now if you are a believer in Christ you may not always feel like a new creation, or look like a new creation. You may not always act like a new creation, but because you have put your faith in Christ, you are a new creation in God's sight, no longer outside, but inside his redeemed family forever. It's a miracle of love and grace. And step by step you are growing into the new creation God has made you. "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

The final thing today is this. **God has given us the ministry of reconciliation.** Paul writes "All this is from God who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." Now this certainly applies to Paul and preachers like myself. We are ambassadors for Christ who proclaim the message of reconciliation, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. We invite people to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

Now not all of us are called to be preachers, but all of us who are in Christ are called and empowered by God for this ministry. Our bias is always towards peace and reconciliation. We live by Paul's words to the Romans, "So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." (Romans 12:18) It deeply bothers our spirit

when there is a barrier or a gulf between ourselves and others. It really doesn't matter whether the door got closed from our side or theirs. We take the initiative to fling open the door of reconciliation. God himself helps us to open it.

Now opening the door can be costly. Opening the door of reconciliation was costly for God. It meant the death of his only Son. You may have to ask someone to forgive you. You yourself may have to forgive someone. You may have to swallow your pride. You may have to open the door and then go out through it to meet the person more than half-way. And it takes courage, courage that God will give us if we ask him. And even when you've done all that it doesn't mean that the other person will accept the offer of a restored relationship. In Jesus' parable, the father held the door open for the older son, even going out through the door and pleading with him. Was the elder son ever reconciled to his father? We don't know. Perhaps. But perhaps not.

There have been times when I've opened the door of reconciliation for someone, but they remain outside, and our relationship remains distant and cold. I can pray for reconciliation to happen, but maybe it won't happen for a long time. Most of us have to live with some unresolved conflict which may not be worked out until we get to heaven. But at least I've opened the door and I will keep it open for as long as it takes. And I must pray for myself, that I will put away resentment and anger and be willing to go through a door someone has opened for me. God forbid that I would stay outside.

But thankfully, there is another side to this. And this is far more common in my experience. When I have opened the door of reconciliation I find that most often a person walks through it. We won't agree on everything for sure, but we've resumed our friendship and our relationship again. When that happens by God's grace it is glorious. The father in Jesus' parable held the door of reconciliation open for his younger son and threw a party when their relationship was restored. You never feel closer to the heart and mind of Christ than when you are a minister of reconciliation. And how wonderful it is when reconciliation takes place. "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when people dwell in unity!" "All this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."