

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Genesis of Our Faith: Truth and Reconciliation  
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Genesis 33:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

The date was April 27, 1994. It is not a date that most of us would recognize or consider of any particular importance. But in South Africa, it is a date on which the nation held its collective breath. It held its breath, because after almost 100 years, Black South Africans would be allowed to vote in a general election. Apartheid had officially ended several years before but this was the moment when the majority Black population would be able to take political power into their own hands. The world was waiting to see if a victory by the African National Congress, or ANC, would usher in a bloodbath of revenge killings against the former white regime and the white populace. This fear was exacerbated by bombing and massacres that preceded the vote. Yet, not only did the vote go smoothly, but the victorious ANC helped to create a constitution that declared that *“the pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all South African citizens and peace require reconciliation between the people of South Africa...and that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimization...”* How would they achieve this lofty goal? They would and did create a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

You may be wondering why they would create a Truth and Reconciliation Commission rather than simply a Reconciliation Commission? The answer lies in an understanding of what reconciliation is and how it works. In the simplest of terms, reconciliation is bringing into balance something that is out of balance. Think about balancing your checkbook, or your online bank statement. You want to make sure that the expenses, the income, and the remaining money all balance. This is a simple reconciliation, bringing your account into balance. In terms of human relationships, the same concept applies. Let me offer you an example. Suppose you baked a batch of cookies for company that is coming to dinner. You put the cookies in the cookie jar. Later in the day you go to check on your cookies and the jar is empty. You turn to the only other person in the house and ask, “Where are my cookies?” The answer is muffled by the cookies crumbling in their mouth, but you hear, “Cookies, what cookies?” Your relationship with this other person is now out of balance. Bringing this relationship back into balance requires two parts. Part one is the person must tell the truth that they took the cookies. The second part is that the other person must make you whole...meaning they need to replace the cookies. When these two parts, acknowledging the truth and making wholeness occur, then reconciliation happens, and your relationship can be brought back into balance. We can see how these two parts of reconciliation work in our morning’s stories.

Our first story is one showing the power of personal truth and reconciliation. The back story to our tale this morning is that Jacob and Esau are brothers...twins to be exact. Esau is the first born and as such was entitled to both the birthright of the eldest and the blessing of his father. Jacob, the schemer, however, manages to manipulate his elder brother into giving up the birthright and then with the help of

their mother, con their father into giving him, Jacob, and not Esau the blessing. The result is that Esau decides that Jacob must die. Jacob escapes and lives abroad for several decades. Finally, he decides to return home. He has no idea how his brother will receive him, but he understands that if they are to share life together there must be truth and reconciliation. This reconciliation begins with Jacob bowing before his older brother seven times. This bowing is admitting the truth that Esau is the older brother and worthy of the respect that comes with that title. It is a way of saying, “Yes I stole your rightful place in the family from you.” The second step of reconciliation, trying to make the one harmed whole, occurs when Jacob makes his older brother take the goods that are offered. Even though in the end, neither brother fully trusts the other, their relationship is healed enough that when their father dies, the brothers can come together in peace and bury him. Truth and reconciliation brought this relationship back into balance.

Our second story is one of cosmic truth and reconciliation. One of the great questions facing God’s people is how to be reconciled to God. This question presents itself because humanity’s relationship with God is out of balance. It is out of balance because human beings have, as Paul puts it, transgressed. I realize that this word, transgression, seems like a religiously archaic word. Yet if we think about the word in common usage, it makes sense. Suppose you are walking down a path. On your right there is a fence with a sign on it that reads, “NO TRESPASSING.” We know that we are not supposed to hop the fence because either we might get hurt or we might hurt something or someone on the other side of the fence. Yet, there is this great temptation to hop the fence to see what is on the other side. This is what human beings have done. God has set before us the path of life, with fences around us to keep us safe. Yet we jump the fences, we trespass, and this leads to harm for God’s creation and creatures. This fence jumping is what has imbalanced our relationship with God. Step one in reconciliation then is that we admit our trespasses...which is why we have weekly confession.

The second step in reconciliation then is to make God whole...but how? Paul argues that it is impossible for human beings to make God whole, meaning that we can never give God enough to make our accounts balance. Instead, the Apostle argues, God balances accounts for us. God does this through becoming in-fleshed as Jesus of Nazareth, who in an act of infinite love takes all our transgressions upon himself, and in dying on the cross, wipes out our debt to God. In this great mystery, the accounts are balanced, and we are reconciled to God. This balancing can never be fully explained or understood, yet it is a reconciliation that people can experience as a life changing event.

The outcome of this life-changing rebalancing in Jesus is twofold. First, those who take advantage of truth and reconciliation by following Jesus find themselves to be new creations: becoming new people capable of living new lives in which it is possible to love God and neighbor; in which it is possible to walk on the paths God has set before them; and in which it is possible to work toward reconciliation with those around them. The second outcome of this reconciliation in Jesus is that those who take advantage of it are given both the message and the mission of reconciliation. They become ambassadors for God, meaning they are those who can help individuals, families, communities, and even nations discover the healing power of reconciliation. In a sense they, and by extension we, have been entrusted with the most powerful weapon of peacemaking...the power of truth and reconciliation.

The question the world wanted to know in South Africa was, would the peacemaking power of truth and reconciliation work? Would it allow a nation deeply divided with thousands of victims of untold acts of violence and brutality balance their accounts? I wish I could say absolutely it did, but I can't. I can't because the jury is still out. For many victims it empowered them to speak the truth of what had happened to them, thus setting the stage for restitution and the rebalancing of their lives. It allowed them to begin to be made whole. For others, it meant that justice was not served for all who suffered, because many perpetrators of violence were able to escape the consequences of their actions. Yet in the end, truth and reconciliation offered, and continues to offer, South Africa an opportunity to heal, to be made whole, and to balance accounts. It is a healing that continues to this day.

We have been entrusted with the most powerful process for bringing relationships back into balance...the power of truth and reconciliation. We have been given reconciliation to help rebalance relationships between individuals, within families, in communities and even in our nation to help heal the divisions that separate us. The question is, will we use it? Will we indeed be those ambassadors? So here is my question for this week, "How am I living into my calling as one entrusted with the ministry and message of reconciliation?"