***I BELIEVE: THE CONFESSION OF 1967***

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Texts: Psalm 34:11-14 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

My dad often said that coincidence is God’s way of working anonymously, so when coincidences start popping up, it leads me to look for divine fingerprints that may be at work. In June, before we had settled on this sermon series on the confessions of the church, I preached a sermon based on the lectionary text for that day: 2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2. Last week Rae used as a text for a sermon on The Belhar Confession: 2 Corinthians 5:16-18. And in my studies on the confession for today – the Confession of 1967 – I found that while there are no biblical references explicitly stated in the confession, the notes to the confession indicate that it was based upon a single passage of Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:19 – *In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself*. Is it then a coincidence that this text should arise three times in the space of just over two months, or might God be anonymously at work in bringing these words and themes before us at this time and place again and again and again?

Paul is speaking to the Corinthians about the new life in Christ. Just a score or so years after Jesus’ death, the Corinthians were struggling to understand what was required of them in this new community called Christian. Paul wants them to understand that life in Christ is not just tweaking the old life they had lived prior to their conversion. Something more was demanded – a new life and changed lives. “*If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation*” he tells them. That new creation is from God, and it is marked by reconciliation – reconciliation among themselves and reconciliation between them and God. Paul suggests that something was broken in the relationship between God’s people and God; Jesus came to mend that fracture, to repair the damage, to set things right in our relationship with God and to call us to live into that new life by being in right relationship not only with God, but with one another. Marks of that relationship are forgiveness, love, and faithfulness. As Christians we are to be new people, bearing a message of reconciliation to the world because Christ has done that reconciling work for us. The Corinthians needed to hear that Word to bring about change in their lives and in their life together.

In grounding the Confession of 1967 on that passage from 2 Corinthians, the writers affirm that Christians in the 1960s needed to hear it and live it as well. As you may recall from living through the 1960s or reading about them in some ancient history book, our nation and world were badly in need of God’s reconciling grace! President Kennedy had been assassinated; the Vietnam War was raging and about to get worse; the Cold War was on; the civil rights movement was raising American consciousness to the racism still rampant across the country; equal rights for women were being demanded; drug use was on the rise; the sexual revolution was in full swing; and protests were raging across the country. Before the decade was out Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy would be assassinated, the death toll in Vietnam would rise significantly, Neil Armstrong would walk on the moon, and Richard Nixon would be elected president – with the shadows of Watergate, the shootings at Kent State, and the real threat of mutually assured nuclear destruction looming just ahead. It was a volatile time in the nation and world! It is no wonder then that the preface to the confession concludes with these words: *Our generation stands in peculiar need of reconciliation in Christ.* Maybe every generation could make that claim, but it was particularly true for that generation as it is for ours!

We are polarized politically across our country; nationalism is on the rise in our nation and others; Russia is devastating Ukraine, Israel is leveling Gaza after the terrorist attack by Hamas, and the fighting rages on while innocents suffer; fentanyl is claiming the lives of people young and old; gun violence is now the leading cause of death for children; climate change is setting off severe weather and rising tides that are devastating communities around the globe, disproportionately those who are poor; a tide of refugees is seeking a safe haven at our southern border and across Europe; and a presidential candidate is promising to be, not a great reconciler for the nation, but his party’s retribution against his opponents. After 57 years one might hope that we would have made more progress than we have toward being reconciled with one another! We have moved forward in some areas of our common life, but we have made little progress in others and have found new sources of division to embrace.

The Confession of 1967 speaks to the chaos and conflict of the 1960s, but also to the divisions and challenges of these days. Its endpoint is a call for reconciliation and justice among people, but the confession’s starting point is God’s reconciliation with humankind through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is because we have been reconciled with God through Christ that we can be reconciled with one another, and we are called to do just that: to be reconciled with one another, sharing in that ministry of reconciliation to which Paul calls the Corinthians. “God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ and the mission of reconciliation to which God has called the church are the heart of the gospel in any age,” says the creed. It was the heart of the gospel in Paul’s day, in 1967, and today too!

The fundamental statement of that confession are words that we use as our Affirmation of Faith each Advent:

*In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to Godself. Jesus Christ is God with us. He is the eternal Son of the Father, who became human and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation. He is present in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue and complete his mission. This work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, humanity, and the world. Therefore, the church calls all people to be reconciled to God and to one another.*

How are you doing with that work of reconciliation? Christ has reconciled you with God, but have you felt so reconciled, or are you at odds with God or just indifferent? God has called you to be reconciled with your neighbor. Are you embracing that call, or are you bent upon revenge or retribution against that neighbor – whoever that neighbor may be? Are you a repairer and reconciler in your family, your work, your school, your church, your community, your world, or are you more intent on tearing down others and building up walls to divide you from them? *To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God’s reconciling community,* asserts the Confession. What might that look like?

The confession focuses on four areas, what it calls *particular problems and crises*, through which God calls the church to act, *guided by the Spirit, humbled by our own complicity, instructed by all attainable knowledge*, and seeking to discern the will of God. Those areas of concern in 1967 are as follows:

1. *God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family…The church is called to bring all people to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing education leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights. Therefore, the church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it.*
2. *God’s reconciliation in Jesus Christ is the ground of the peace, justice, and freedom among nations which all powers of government are called to serve and defend…Although nations may serve God’s purposes in history, the church which identifies the sovereignty of any one nation or any one way of life with the cause of God denies the lordship of Christ and betrays its calling.*
3. *The reconciliation of humanity through Jesus Christ makes it plain that enslaving poverty in a world of abundance is an intolerable violation of God’s good creation….A church that is indifferent to poverty or evades responsibility in economic affairs, or is open to one social class only, or expects gratitude for its beneficence makes a mockery of reconciliation and offers no acceptable worship to God.*
4. *Anarchy in sexual relationships is a symptom of humankind’s alienation from God, neighbor, and themselves…Reconciled to God, each person has joy in and respect for their own humanity and that of other persons…The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by people when it…withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time.*

The confession asserts that *God’s redeeming work in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of our lives: social and cultural, economic and political, scientific and technological, individual and corporate*, including the natural environment. It is a comprehensive call to be reconciled to God, to one another, and to the world, specifically because God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ embraces all of those areas of life as well. Those crises identified by the confession continue to be problems which we address as a Matthew 25 congregation seeking to eradicate systemic poverty and dismantle structural racism, as a congregation opposing the heresy of Christian Nationalism, and as a community of faith that welcomes all people. Concretely then, what does such reconciliation look like?

Lee Hinson-Hasty tells of going with his teenage son to New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art and seeing a collection called “The Civil War and American Art.” Among the hundreds of paintings, they saw one entitled, “Fire of Leaves.” As they stood looking at the painting, his son said, “*Look*, t*he two boys have laid down their coats. One is a Confederate; the other Union. They are huddled together…*” And then it hit Hinson-Hasty what had caught his son’s eye, and he finished his son’s sentence, *“…and they are building a small fire*.” His son elaborated, “*The two boys were in the wilderness and there was a long path ahead of them. And they recognized the only way they were going to find their way out and back home was to work together*.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Two soldiers on the opposite sides of a civil war, setting aside the blue and the gray and working together to build a fire to survive. Perhaps that painting illustrates something of the ministry of reconciliation to which we are called:

a path to peace upon which Jesus guides us,

a path that is shared with friends and foes alike,

a path that leads us to set aside our differences and work together,

a path that finds in “the other” common humanity and common needs.

That is the ministry of reconciliation to which we are called as disciples of the risen Christ. It is the ministry that lives into the words of the psalmist:

*Which of you desires life and covets many days to enjoy good?*

*Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it. (Ps.34;12, 14)*

Faithfully, ardently, lovingly – together – pursue it! Now maybe all this is just a coincidence – but then again, maybe not! Amen

1. Lee Hinson-Hasty, *The Presbyterian Outlook*: September 16, 2013, pp.11-12 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)