Last week we finished a series of eight sermons. I didn’t hear anybody complain about there being eight. So this time I decided to have a series of sixteen. No! Just joking! This is a series of only two.

The theme is reconciliation. That word is used a lot about people’s broken relationships with God and the renewal which God offers to us through Christ.

But these sermons are about broken human relationships. It is about people and for people who are split apart by emotions or sin or wrongdoing or misunderstanding. The goal of these two sermons is to promote reconciliation. That is what God wants for us. That is what I want to encourage with these two sermons.

Broken relationships are part of the human experience. I think I avoided any real problems with people until I turned five years old. Then there was trouble. I attended kindergarten at an Episcopal Church. We began every day seated in little wooden chairs, all in neat rows. Then the teacher would have to stand and turn toward the Christian flag. Next we would sing the first verse of “Onward Christian Soldiers.” After that we closed our eyes while a teacher said a prayer. Finally we sat back down… same motions, every week, every day.

One morning I was dutifully following this sacred routine when, during the prayer, a boy behind me pulled back my chair. What happened next was exactly what he wanted to happen. The teacher said “Amen” and I sat down kerplop on the floor!

It hurt. That EVIL five-year old behind me smirked with pride until the teacher scolded him. I thought he deserved a lot worse. Fifty years in the state pen….or forty years of hard labor. I would have given him a choice.
But none of that happened. That was a disappointing day. It was a grave in-
justice.

So I learned two things. I learned to look back before sitting down in a 
chair. It might not be where I thought it was. I also learned to avoid that kid. 
I avoided him for the rest of the year. My rear end was not broken, but what-
ever relationship I had with him was definitely broken!

The people who wrote the Bible knew about broken relationships but 
of a much more serious variety. They knew how people can speak evil of 
one another or steal from one another….or worse…much worse. The Bible 
has dozens of accounts of human conflict leading to disastrous consequenc-
es. As I said last week, we find a great deal of mercy in the Old Testament. 
We see God reaching out in love so that we might be reconciled with one 
another.

In the fifth book of the Bible, with the birth of the Church, we begin 
to read of people who had committed themselves to a common Lord. Despite 
that they didn’t always get along peaceably. Paul the Apostle and other early 
leaders sometimes addressed these conflicts by composing letters which later 
became part of the Bible. I know it sounds odd, but we can be grateful that 
those first Christians had conflicts with each other and that some saint in 
some distant town or prison wrote them a letter to try to straighten out 
things.

A good example of a leader helping a congregation work out their is-
ssues is found in Matthew’s gospel chapter 18. “If another member of the 
church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are 
alone.” We see one method of conflict resolution here. One fellow feels that 
a second fellow has sinned against him. The circumstances of a conflict are 
always unique, so we have to wonder if the second fellow feels that the first 
fellow had sinned against him! Conflict can get muddled and messy right 
away, can’t it? But I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.

So in Matthew’s Gospel conflict is to be worked out, if possible, in 
private. There is no reason to build it up and get other people involved, es-
pecially if you are a Christian, a person who follows the Prince of Peace, Je-
sus Christ. Our goal should never be to shame the other person, punish the 
other person in the court of public opinion or get revenge. Those things are 
rules out for Christians.
We follow a Lord who in the Sermon on the Mount commanded us to love our enemies. He also gave us a model prayer. We are to request forgiveness of God for the trespasses we commit, just as we are already forgiving other people for their trespasses against us.

A lot of interpersonal problems cannot be resolved without outside help. So the next advice in Matthew’s gospel is to first bring in one or two other Christians. If that doesn’t get results, you take it to the whole congregation. If that doesn’t work, then Matthew’s readers are told to shun the other person or eject that person from the congregation.

Now several things have changed since those words were written down in the first century. We in the mainline churches feel we should work harder than that for reconciliation. And we have rejected excommunication or shunning. They are not appropriate.

Dr. Gregory Jones has written a wonderful book entitled *Embodying Forgiveness.* He provides us with six steps to follow in times of inter-relational conflict. We will look at the others next week, but in the third step Dr. Jones tells us to make certain we have concern for the other person. We are to remember that the other person is a *child of God.* If you look at the person who hurt you as a brother or sister in Christ, then you will strive for reconciliation. You won’t give up unless you absolutely have to.

Now if you had a real family member who was at odds with you then you wouldn’t casually give up on that relationship. No, you would work tirelessly to repair it. So why not treat a brother or sister in Christ with the same seriousness? A Welsh poet once said that forgiveness and love involve “walking through thorns to stand by your enemy’s side.”

So getting to reconciliation is often hard. It’s usually complicated. Two sermons won’t do the subject justice. But I want us to consider the primary reason we should strive for reconciliation when there is conflict, hurt and pain. The answer lies in the nature of our creator. The Bible is clear that

---

if God is anything, God is love. We can’t see God. We will never know God completely, at least in this world. But one thing we know for certain about God is that God is love.

If God is the creator and God is love, then that means that love starts with God. It comes from God. So as the First Letter of John states: “We love because he first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters.”

The two go together – loving the God who loves us and loving others. Loving others means that our goal is reconciliation. It’s not simple, but there’s no other way.
Matthew 18: 15 – 20, NRSV

15 “If another member of the church[a] sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.[c] 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

1 John 4: 7 – 21, NRSV

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love[c] because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, [b] are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister[c] whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters[d] also.