

To Be Reconciled: A Journey Through Lent

“A New Way to See” (2 Corinthians 5:16-21; 2 Corinthians 3:7-18)

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Scripture

¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21
New International Version (NIV)

Introduction

1. It was 2015 and one week before the wedding of Grace and Keir Johnson in which the Grace's mother took a photo of the dress that she was intending to wear to the wedding, not knowing that her photograph would trigger a global debate. Grace's mother showed the photo of her dress to several family members only to have the family not get past the fact that they couldn't agree as to what the color of the dress even was. Grace posted the picture of her mother's dress on her Facebook page, and her friends *also* disagreed over the colors of the dress. Some saw it as white with gold lace while others saw it as blue with black lace.

Here is the photograph:



I can't imagine why there were any disputes because this dress is so obviously white and gold, right?! What? You don't agree?

Ok, with a show of hands, how many here think this dress is blue and black?

How many see it as white and gold?

Any other colors?

2. We are experiencing the very same confusion that went viral after a member of the wedding band member posted the photo on a Tumblr account where it got picked up on Twitter. At its peak it was getting 14,000 views a second until at one point it crashed twitter. International celebrities like Taylor Swift said it left her “confused and scared.” The Washington Post described it as the “the drama that divided the planet.”¹

The Scientific community jumped into the debate and held a survey of 1,400 respondents. 57% saw the dress as blue and black; 30% saw it as white and gold; 10% saw it as blue and brown; and 10% could switch between all of these color combinations.



All along, there was no question that the dress was blue and black. The mother of the bride confirmed that from the very beginning. It was *the photograph* of the dress that set off the fury, *and here is the scientific explanation why:*

[ONSCREEN: TRT 2:06]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AskAQwOBvhc>

Description of Video: The difference of opinion relates to how the human brain perceives color and chromatic adaptation. And, there is a connection to how the brain processes the various hues of daylight sky and people either discount the blue side, in which case they end up seeing white and gold, or discount the gold side and end up seeing blue and black, even if the dress is actually blue and black.

3. Got it all figured out?! The most important take away from this anatomical phenomenon is the matter of perception. Our view of things is biased toward the ways our brains have learned to perceive things, which are always being conditioned by our surroundings. This is true not only when looking at photographs being influenced by the angle of sunshine, but also true in all of life

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_dress_\(viral_phenomenon\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_dress_(viral_phenomenon)) (accessed 3-4-16)

and how we see one another as influenced by the positive and negative biases we are taught by our families, our neighborhoods, our churches, our schools, and our places of work.

4. So, when the Apostle Paul says, “because of Christ and new life in Christ we are to no longer view ourselves, or anyone else from a worldly point of view, it is important to take a long pause and realize that our cultural lenses, our family systems, and even our viewing angle on Christianity and religion can clarify or distort our vision.

One of the reasons that people’s attachment to Christian religion comes and goes over time, but a general interest and attachment to Jesus is consistent is because of the simple and pure way *Jesus* viewed people. The four gospel biographies, (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) tell us that Jesus viewed everyone--from loose moralists to uptight legalists, from virtuous people without religion to mean spirited believers, from the rich to the poor to the poor in spirit and rich in love—everyone was viewed with a clear-minded sense of integral love, grace, and unthinkable generosity.

5. The challenge of today’s Scripture is that the Apostle Paul assumes that we will imitate Jesus and his ethical view and practice of compassion, mercy and justice for everyone, but Paul went one step further. Paul spoke of being ambassadors of reconciliation. And, this is where our journey in Lent converges with Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection because the work of reconciliation goes much deeper than saying “I’m sorry” to another person, or getting two people to say “I’m sorry.”

Reconciliation as imitative of Christ includes the emersion of our personal narratives into the narratives where conflict and harm have been done, and for the sake of Christ’s love, we allow empathy and identification to help us in specific moments and over time participate in the healing of people’s relationship with God, and the wounds that people do to one another.

6. The wounding people do to one another is constant and inevitable given our sinful nature but, it seems especially pronounced in a presidential election year. I am exhausted by the landscape of wounds I learn about every time I turn on my computer or smart phone. “Isms” and “phobias” dominate. Think about it--“isms” such as “ageism,” “sexism,” “ableism” (superiority over people with disabilities), and of course the most recent versions of “racism” which is always just beneath the surface of things because of our racially framed economic commitments when our country was birthed. And, a key source of fuel of our “isms” is unmerited *people* phobias or fears such as xenophobia (fear of other cultures) and homophobia (the fear of gay people) as two key examples.
7. These are real problems and shockingly, Americans seem almost eager to wound one another...and for sure are not working hard enough to not “see” one another! Some days I just wish we could swap out these really bad “isms” and phobias for the lesser pathologies like “Ailurophobia” the fear of cats or “Peladophobia”- the fear of bald people. Reconciling cat lovers and bald people would be much easier! I like cats. See, done!

Well, what can Christ followers do in a time of political rancor and more and more outlandish incivility that pummels our imaginations so hard we can’t really even see anymore? Here is what we can do: we can remind ourselves in the season leading to Easter, to be fully awake to the transformative presence of Christ in our lives such that, like Jesus saw others, we view ourselves and others with increasingly clear-minded generosity.

A. A New Way to See Ourselves and Others

1. Today's Scripture is part of the Apostle Paul's second letter to the first century church in the Roman city of Corinth. The "new creation" language that Paul used speaks to the fact that once a person has awakened to Christ, there is a change that takes place in the way we see ourselves and the world. The effect, timing, and intensity of awakening is different for everyone, but when its authentic, its real!

Paul's new creation theological framework is found throughout his letters to the Early Churches and at times is framed in terms of relationship and seeing one another. The broad teaching of Scripture tells us that God is always pursuing us, and like someone who senses that someone else is close behind them, and turns around to look face to face with that someone, spiritual awakening to Christ is turning around toward God (the New Testament Greek word for "repent" literally means to turn around) and experiencing love and acceptance that goes beyond human comprehension.

2. This is important to grasp because faith in Christ is more than a mental exercise. It is an encounter. Paul talked about encounter with God earlier in his second letter to the Corinthian church.² In chapter three Paul made reference to an ancient Hebrew account of Moses experiencing God and needing to have a veil placed over his face because his encounters with God left his countenance too intense for the average Hebrew citizen to take in. Paul's point was that, unlike Moses...:

¹⁶ ...whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:16-18. NIV.

This idea of encountering God with face to face like intensity and being changed into Christ-likeness in distinct moments and over time is compelling and complex. It means that we will never be done learning, changing and growing. And, that our time together here in community will not be spent simply reinforcing our current perception of things, but rather challenging our assumptions just as Jesus did to his listeners and his community.

This is why I like a quote I recently heard from 20th century poet Maria Rainer Rilke: "I am learning to see. I don't know why it is, but everything enters me more deeply and doesn't stop where it once used to. I have an interior that I never knew of..."³

3. Beyond challenging our perceptions, there is another struggle unearthed in Paul's "facial seeing" imagery. We do not always find it comfortable to look face to face with God or one another. Another 20th century writer, C.S. Lewis, wrestled with this in what many consider his most mature work: "Till we have faces."⁴ The entire book holds the reader in a tension between always wanting

² 2 Corinthians 3:7-18.

³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/239632-i-am-learning-to-see-i-don-t-know-why-it> (accessed 3-4-16)

⁴ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2013/11/celebrating-c-s-lewis-till-we-have-faces/> (accessed 3-5-16)

to see God and others face to face, but because of impure desires, the grey matter of life, and fear, we hide our faces even while our longing to gaze upon one another never goes away because we are created to “see” one another and to “see” God.

4. There is something powerful about looking at someone face-to-face and encountering God in the exchange. I could tell you of many eye gazing moments with my beautiful wife Holly. People who have deep relational love in their lives, know about this. But, what about a broader mix of us?

There was a recent moment that took place in our community’s Lenten season and during the Ash Wednesday Service that was memorable. For those who are new to the idea of Ash Wednesday, it is the worship service that marks the beginning of Lent. The service peaks with the marking of ashes in the sign of the cross, in our unique way, on the forehead *or* the hand. Ashes are a tactile experience of humility. In our touch and interaction with ashes we remind ourselves of our mortality and submit ourselves to the way of humility...the way of Jesus.

Standing face to face, and looking into the eyes of each person right in front of me I said “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Repent and believe the gospel.” Standing face to face, some of you were reflective, others peacefully smiling, and others were tearful. But, in every case I experienced a face-to-face connection that transcended eye contact. We all knew that God was present. I think that is partly what Paul was getting at.

5. For those who have yet to know such Presence not only in worship services, but anywhere and anytime--one need only acknowledge that God is real, present, and speaking to your heart—that Christ is who Christ said he is, and then open your heart, soul, and mind to being led by God’s Spirit in day to day life. For those new or those who already experiencing such abiding Presence, it is important to acknowledge that such gazing into God will teach us over time more about what Paul said in today’s text when he said that “everything old will pass away.”

In saying this, Paul was reflecting on the fact that we awaken to Christ in specific moments and over time. And, the awakenings are moments of invitation to swap out old lenses and put in new lenses, like updating eyeglasses so we are able to “see” ourselves and others more clearly and more generously like what Paul taught in a letter to the Early Church in Galatia:⁵

- We swap out the lenses of judgment and cynicism for love and joy.
- We exchange the lenses of contrarianism and retributive justice for peace and restorative forbearance.
- We give up the lenses of mean spirited-ness and selfishness for kindness and goodness.
- We trade in the lenses of flakiness, harshness, and impulsivity for the lenses of faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

6. Even with these new lenses, though, the work of reconciliation is not automatic. We have to work at it, almost become professionals as it. Which is why Paul wrote:

¹⁹ ...God has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal *through* us.

2 Corinthians 5:19b-20a, NIV

⁵ Galatians 5:22-23.

This is the kind of language that always sounds great in a church service, or when we read our Bibles at home, but when lived out in real life is some the messiest work humans ever endeavor to do. This is so because to reconcile people means that something has been broken that needs to be reconciled.

B. A New Way To View The Work of Reconciliation.

1. I already gave a certain amount of warning about how difficult the work of reconciliation is everywhere...at home, at work, in church, and broader society. I share this because over more than 25 years of pastoral ministry I have learned that actually following through on what Paul taught makes people very uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable. And so, I think that we need a fresh way to look at this difficult work. I recently read a true story that I believe does just that.
2. Celeste is a women who lives in Cape Town, South Africa, and was a mother for the first time when, three days after birth and in a medicated haze, another women pretending to be a nurse stole her baby while she slept. The Washington Post interviewed Celeste and tells it this way:

“Your baby is crying,” said the woman, who was dressed like a nurse in a beige top and maroon pants. “Can I pick up the child?” Celeste assented, watching the woman scoop up the child, Zephany, before she fell back asleep.

When Celeste awoke again, it was because another nurse — a real nurse — was frantically shaking her. “Where is your child?” the nurse asked urgently. “What do you mean?” Celeste answered in confusion. “The nurse was just here with the baby.” Horror suddenly sharpened Celeste’s cloudy mind. She tore the IV from her arm and, despite her fresh surgical wound, began running around the hospital’s halls, desperately searching for her missing baby. But Zephany, which means, “the Lord has hidden” in Hebrew, was nowhere to be found. She would remain lost for almost 18 years.⁶

For almost two decades, the story of the vanishing baby with the biblical name made headlines in South Africa. Family and friends honored Zephany’s birthday every year in pain and wondering.

3. Celeste had a second child who was named Cassidy and as Cassidy grew, the strangest thing happened when she entered high school. Everyone kept telling Cassidy about her doppelganger (which is a German expression for “look alike”) that was a senior at the school. They had the same light-brown skin, almond shaped eyes, broad nose and ample lips. Cassidy felt strangely drawn to the older girl, and they become friends. When Cassidy told her parents, they became intrigued, and after uncomfortable conversations, investigation, and even DNA samples—in the end, it was true—they were proven to be sisters and the older girl was Zephany, stolen at birth.

She had a different name, but she had grown up barely a mile from her biological family. Celeste finally met her daughter on February 26, 2015, and burst into tears and couldn’t stop crying while she choked out “For 17 years I have been looking for you.” The woman who stole Zephany was arrested and charged with kidnapping and fraud. Pleading not guilty, the woman painted herself

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/02/24/19-years-after-her-baby-was-stolen-a-mom-meets-the-alleged-kidnapper-in-court/> (accessed 3-5-16)

as an unwitting victim who had been abused and raped as a child, beaten by boyfriends and suffered a series of miscarriages.

Incredibly, Celeste has said she is prepared to forgive the woman—even if the legal system cannot.

4. To me, this is an archetypal story of reconciliation.

- We are all created as the beloved and in order to belong to God and one another.
- Our identity gets stolen either by thieves, oppressors, damaged people, or in some cases—we give it away.
- A new creation reconciler is needed to seek the lost, like Cassidy, the second child. And the reconciler's work is to seek and identify, have empathy, look face to face and explore the God given connections to one another.
- Then, this is the really uncomfortable part—there is always fall out from the crime. Wounds do not heal quickly, justice is often applied unevenly, forgiveness is given by some and not by others, and in the end, even for those who forgive and for those who brokered the reconciliation, a scar remains---just as it did with Jesus from resurrection day forward.

Conclusion

1. Today's Scripture is compelling and difficult. But, as a Christian thinker once said, "The Bible is not a rule book, it is a school of relationship and that is why it is so messy."⁷ The Christian worldview points to the fact that from beginning to end and over thousands of years the Scripture points everything toward Jesus. And, the distance between Jesus and his teaching and the trajectory of human consciousness forces us to see that in biblical history, and all of human history, progress toward Christ-consciousness is always three steps forward and two steps back, three steps forward and two steps back. New creation Christ followers are those who join the ancient reconcilers to propelled the three steps forward! That is our invitation!
2. And, in this Lent leading to Easter--consider what God may be asking *you* to do! You can insert any identity conflict into the reconciliation archetype: women and men, disabled and abled, young and old, black and white, light black and dark black, yellow and red, straight and gay. In the entirety of the human experience it is the same pattern as the story of the stolen baby.

And, it is only when we reconcile to God and with one another, and really begin to see one another with clear-minded generosity as God sees us, that the effect of our new creation Christ-consciousness really begins to change our relationships, which changes our family relationships, which changes our neighborhood relationships, which changes our school and work relationships, which, in ever widening circles, really does bring God's kingdom of grace and love to earth as it is in heaven.

⁷ This is a summary statement from Richard Rohr's devotion--<https://cac.org/a-school-of-relationship-2016-03-03/>

Prayer

God of all, you are the God who “sees.” See us here and now. And, help us to see others as we reach to be like Christ in the way we live our lives and get at the work of reconciliation. Forgive us for the times we do not honor our belovedness or the belovedness of others. God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit—equip us to be reconcilers. Heal our wounds and make all things new.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

Benediction

As the new week now begins—may we awaken and re-awaken to the transformative presence of Christ in our lives such that our view of our selves and others becomes increasingly clear-minded and generous now and over time.

Go in Peace. Amen.