

Sermon Pentecost 7A July 19 2020
2 Corinthians 5:17-19
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you beautiful Saints from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.* Let's pray:

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;

All the king's horses and all the king's men

Couldn't put Humpty together again."

This well-known nursery rhyme is a commentary on the present state of the world. Like Humpty, the world had a great fall when humanity decided to go-it-alone, choosing God's knowledge of good and evil over his tree of life. The world has fallen off the wall of God's peace, security & love because of sin.

There's no doubt we live in a broken world. The relentless onslaught of evil and human maleficence clearly demonstrates the world's brokenness. For example, just when we were getting on top of Covid-19 in this country, a combination of desperation, agitation, and complacency allowed it to spread again. Many people have been forced into another lockdown, damaging already fragile, vulnerable, and distressed people, and the nation's psyche. Everywhere we look there's desperation and brokenness.

We need a rescuer, but when we look at humanity's attempts to heal this brokenness, all we see is a litany of failure:

- The Roman Empire thought it could heal the world's brokenness by conquering the world and instituting emperor worship. That didn't work.
- Both Christianity and Islam tried through conquest and forced confessions. During the Inquisition and Crusades, the Christian church forced people to confess Jesus as their Saviour. Islam spread by Muslims conquering the Middle East, North Africa and parts of Southern Europe. The Christian church and Islam only brought more hatred and disharmony.
- Various forms of government and economic systems have attempted to bring healing to the nations but none of them have succeeded. Capitalism, Communism, Totalitarianism, Democracy, Theocracy have all failed to repair our broken world.

A power far greater than all human ingenuity is the only hope for the world. There's only one person who can repair our broken world and his name is Jesus Christ, Son of God, God in human flesh; only he can bring about reconciliation and restore the dignity of humanity created in his image.

Good news, Saints! As we breathe, Jesus *is* in the process of putting this broken world back together. And despite being told that we must consider our current circumstances as the new normal, the fact that remains unchanged and unchangeable, is this: By dying on the cross and defeating death for us, Jesus has made it possible for us to have an eternal, loving relationship with God. That, is the Christian's eternal normal.

By trusting Jesus, we receive God's forgiveness and enjoy eternal reconciliation with God. Once we accept that we are reconciled with God; once we dare to believe that we are forgiven for the sake of Jesus, we are freed to reconcile ourselves with other people because God

changes our hearts and enables us to forgive and love. Forgiveness and love are what Jesus equips us with, to join him in putting our broken world back together.

We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the body of Christ. We are Jesus' hands, feet and mouth- piece. What an awesome responsibility! What an adventure! We are gifted and permitted to announce reconciliation between ourselves and God, and to seek it with others. Difficult to do, but wonderful to witness and it's sorely needed now as much as ever. Rather than wagging our fingers at Victoria and tut-tutting [which I confess I have done]; we are entrusted to wield the unparalleled power of love and forgiveness, with gentleness and humility. This is what brings about extraordinary healing and restoration as we will hear in the following story:

"It was in church in Munich that I saw him – a balding heavysset man in a grey overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken. It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favourite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I like to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown. "When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a Scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says, NO FISHING ALLOWED."

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the centre of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were.

The place was Ravensbruck and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard – one of the cruellest guards.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: “A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!”

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

“You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,” he was saying, “I was a guard there.” No, he did not remember me.

“But since that time,” he went on, “I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein,” – again the hand came out – “will you forgive me?”

And I stood there – I whose sins had again and again been asked to be forgiven – could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place – could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there – hand held out – but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it – I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses,” Jesus says, “neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion – I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. “Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently, “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried, "with all my heart." For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely, as I did then. But even so, I realised it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Romans 5:5, "...because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

Corrie Ten Boom

Dear Brothers and Sisters, we too, have received God's love, poured out in abundance through the Holy Spirit who dwells in and with us. We don't have to be famous holocaust survivors to join Jesus in his ministry of reconciliation. God will use our everyday lives to help put the world back together.

So, let's add to the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme:

But Jesus gathered the pieces in his arms,

Securing and protecting him from further harm;

With grace and love all revealing

Jesus restored Humpty with total healing.

Jesus is putting the world back together and we, Saints, are powerfully equipped and graciously invited to join him as the Body of his love and forgiveness for all the world. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.