

## SERMON: 4 Lent C

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 & Luke 15

Preached Sunday, March 14, 2010 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

*After the Civil War, General Robert E. Lee visited a woman in Kentucky, who took him to the remains of a great, old tree in front of her house. Once there, she lamented bitterly that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Federal artillery fire. She seemed to expect some words from Lee, condemning the North or at least sympathizing with her loss. After a brief silence, Lee said to her, "Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it."\*  
*Cut it down, and forget it.**

*What would the great general think of those bumper stickers we still see today – the ones with the rebel flag and the words, "No, I ain't forgetting"? Since he was an Episcopalian, I'd like to think that Lee had heard teachings and sermons about forgiveness and reconciliation in church. From a look at his history, it seems safe to say he got the message somewhere along the way. In 1865, Robert E. Lee wrote to a former Confederate soldier, saying, "This war, being at an end, ... I [now] believe it to be the duty of everyone to unite in the restoration of the country and the re-establishment of peace and harmony...."\*\*\**

*Perhaps, like us, Lee was in church one Sunday when he heard the words of Paul about reconciliation. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul says "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ...God ... reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (5:17-19). Living in the times we do, it might be helpful to pause for a moment to define what Paul is talking about. At its most basic, reconciliation means being restored to a state of harmony and peace. It's the process of creating unity where there's disagreement and conflict. The need for reconciliation was obvious to most citizens after the Civil War. But even in lesser moments, there is always a multitude of broken relationships and conflicts crying out for this ministry. In friendships, families, marriages, neighborhoods, businesses, congregations and even within our own souls, the need for reconciliation is always present. Right now, you can probably name more than one such circumstance, without even taxing your mind.*

*Paul makes it clear that being a Christian means being a reconciler: "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us" (vv. 19 & 20). Do you hear the direct connection made in these words? Christ was the great reconciler between God and all of Creation. Since we are followers of Christ, we – as a direct consequence – are necessarily "ambassadors" of reconciliation. This is like receiving a letter in the mail, telling us that the U.S. Senator from North Carolina had gotten us appointed as a special ambassador. The letter says that our mission is to work for healing and unity in every situation we encounter where there is brokenness and estrangement. Well, guess what? The letter came a long time ago; we received our commission on the day we were baptized. You and I already are ambassadors for the Prince of Peace.*

*Most of us are aware, however, that reconciliation sometimes can feel like an impossible*

*task. The greatest obstacles to peace and harmony may just be bitterness, resentment and guilt. Someone hurts or offends someone else, and the injured party broods over the wrong which he or she thinks has been done. Before long, it feels as if a huge chasm has opened between the two parties – a chasm the late Evel Knievel himself could not jump across. The best strategy for bridging this terrible divide is to consider how God handles the offenses we've committed in our lives. There once was a minister who carried the burden of a secret sin she had committed many years before. She had repented of her wrongdoing, but still had no sense that God had forgiven her. In the minister's church was a woman who deeply loved God and claimed to have dreams in which Jesus spoke to her. The minister, however, was skeptical. To test her, she said, "The next time you speak to Christ, I want you to ask him what sin your minister committed while she was in seminary." The woman agreed to the request.*

*A few days later the minister saw the woman and asked, "Did Christ once again visit you in your dreams?"*

*"Yes he did," she replied.*

*"And did you ask him what sin I committed in seminary?"*

*Again she said, "Yes."*

*"Well what did he say?"*

*"He said, 'I don't remember.' "*

*Sometimes, we have to work on ourselves to let go of bitterness and resentment; to forget as well as forgive. Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, was reminded one day of a hurtful thing someone had done to her many years before. But she acted as if she'd never even heard of it. "Don't you remember it?" her friend asked. "No," came Barton's reply, "I distinctly remember forgetting it."*

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*Perhaps the greatest story of reconciliation ever told is the one the one we have in today's reading from the Gospel. We've heard the story so many times, it's hard to absorb just how profound it is. A worthwhile Lenten reflection would be to re-read the story as a devotional exercise. If you take me up on this, try to note the number of ways the father would have every right to be deeply hurt and offended – not only by the younger son, but also the older brother. And yet – and yet – the loving father refuses to harbor resentment or dwell on the past. He seems intent only on welcoming home*

*and being reconciled to his wayward son, in spite of everything. He "was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (v. 32).*

*[Note here Ben Long "The Return of the Prodigal Son" fresco & sketch (see at right) - explain & describe.]*

*What's so hard to fathom, I think, is to realize that this is precisely how God feels about all of us, no matter what we do. God really doesn't even care to hear our speeches, with our well-rehearsed pleas of repentance. Our Creator simply wants reconciliation – between us and God, between us and our brothers and*

sisters, and even within ourselves. God wants every last one of us back home, with a ring on our finger, a robe on our

shoulders, enjoying the biggest welcome-home party we could possibly imagine. This probably doesn't sound like the way to end a sermon on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, but they're the most appropriate ones I can imagine: *Let the party begin!*



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\*Charles Bracelen Flood, Lee: The Last Years.

\*\*"Robert E. Lee" in Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>; accessed March 2010).

^Leadership Magazine, Summer 1985, citing A Forgiving God in an Unforgiving World, Ron Lee Davis.

\*Luis Palau, Experiencing God's Forgiveness (Multnomah Press, 1985).