Reconciling Agents of a Reconciling God (RARG)

Tim Isbell's notes on this sermon from 1964

(Also available by typing **bit.ly/reconciling-agents** into the address bar of any browser.)

Robin and I heard this sermon on a cassette tape in 1965, which was given to us by Pastor Raisner of Second Baptist Church. It was the first clear and credible unpacking of the gospel I remember. Culbert G. Rutenber delivered it to the American Baptist Convention in Portland, Oregon.

The sermon starts at about 6:45 minutes into the recording. It concludes about 39 minutes later. Here's a link to the audio file of the sermon.

These are not complete notes; if all you do is read them, you'll get maybe 20% of the value of the message. But they will help you extract the value from the sermon.

The sermon is based on started with the lyrics of the Kingston Trio's song, They're Rioting in Africa.

They're rioting in Africa,
They're starving in Spain.
There are hurricanes in Florida,
And Texas needs rain
The whole world is festering
With unhappy souls.
The French hate the Germans,
The Germans hate the Poles.
Italians hate Yugoslavs,
South Africans hate the Dutch,
And I don't like anybody very much!

But we can be tranquil
And thankful and proud,
For man's been endowed
With a mushroom-shaped cloud.
And we know for certain
That some lovely day
Someone will set the spark off,
And we will all be blown away!

They're rioting in Africa,
There's strife in Iran.
What nature doesn't do to us
Will be done by our fellow man

The song poses a timeless problem. Everything is so new and getting newer all the time. But that's only half the story. Everything is so old and getting older all the time. Hate among people is as old as ever. People could never get along with one another. The difference is in the

urgency today because of the enormous number of people in the world, the enormous destructive power, and the enormous amount of technology that forces us to be aware of everything everywhere.

If sin is old, as old as man, God's love is old, as old as God. Man's disorder and God's design climaxed in Jesus Christ. At the cross, men and women who were set free from sin were given the ministry of reconciliation. We are the agents of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5.11-21

The humanist stream says the sum/substance of the Christian faith is the love of neighbor. But that's not true. In every heart, a God-shaped blank remains that only Jesus Christ can fill.

But in our American Baptist tradition, we're not likely to miss on the side of minimizing God to magnify man. We will more likely magnify God to escape from or avoid man. We're more likely to over-focus on our relationship with God to hide from our horizontal relationships with people. Personal piety, instead of being an aid to social justice, becomes a substitute for it.

But neither group tells us much about the God who calls us to reconciliation.

– 15:50 minutes

H.H. Farmer said, "Whenever we look into a human face, we see the claims of God (man is made in the image of God), and whenever we look into the face of God, we see the claims of man."

God has no needs. Therefore, what is mirrored in God's face is man's needs. Whenever we look into God's face, we see man's needs, and it is our responsibility to share the good news of reconciliation. So the proof of conversion is when it shatters our pride and self-centeredness, transforming us into genuine neighbors. To be born again means being born into love. Where this is misunderstood, we have misunderstood the meaning of a conversion experience.

– 18:20 minutes in

Fortunately, there is evidence that when two men meet who are made new in Jesus Christ, even in the most challenging circumstances, the gospel is the power of God unto reconciliation. Lesslie Newbigin, the bishop of South India, tells a story…

Newbigin decided to take a tour of his Diocese. In one place, he met a very curious group of Christians, led by an Indian man with a stainless-steel baton by which he indicated when his fellow Christians were to stand, sit, and just about everything else. The Indian evangelist was clad in aged RAF gear. When World War II broke out, he was preaching in Burma when he met the Japanese army. They arrested the evangelist, took his belongings, took him to the guard post, bound him, and threw him into a corner.

A Japanese officer came, looked down at the evangelist, walked over to a table where the evangelist's few belongings were, and picked up the evangelist's Tamil Bible.

The officer did not know a word of Tamil, but he recognized the book as a Bible. The officer held up his hand and made the sign of the cross. The evangelist didn't know one word of Japanese, but he realized the officer was asking if he was a Christian. So the evangelist nodded yes. The

Japanese officer walked over to the evangelist and stood with his arms outstretched. Then the officer cut the evangelist's bonds and set him free. But before the officer left, he gave the evangelist the stainless-steel officer's staff he was still using.

Christians, no matter our backgrounds, are part of a very special community—one where we share a deep bond of love because we've all given our hearts to Jesus.

William Barclay comments on this story to illustrate how Jesus Christ bridges the gulf between people who otherwise can't get along.

(see printout from the old sermon for more notes on Lesslie Newbigin's story)

Two men had an unbridgeable gulf, and Jesus Christ brought them together. In a world where we just can't get along with one another, a gospel that can do this is highly valuable.

So let's glory in that story, but let's not get sentimental about the story. Let's apply it to our time and place. God, in his intention, intended that in Jesus Christ, the church should be a show window of what God can do, beyond divisions out in the world, to create community. The church is the God-formed fellowship in which there are no racial divisions, class divisions, sexual divisions, or any other divisions, but all are one in Jesus Christ. Only a reconciling church can preach a reconciling gospel.

– *23:00*

Reconciliation of Christians with other Christians is one issue, but there's another. It is the reconciliation between the church and the millions worldwide who have a grudge against us. Until we reconcile this, our message is stalled. Until we address this issue, our entire enterprise is stuck.

Luke 16.19-31 tells the story of a rich man and Lazarus. The point isn't that the rich man exploited the poor man, abused the poor man, or called the police to remove the man. The problem is that the rich man was privileged and had no intention of renouncing any of his privileges. That was Jesus' whole point.

It's pretty easy to identify Lazarus in the world today. But who is the rich man? We of the white privileged West are the rich man. We have all the good jobs and all the good land.

Here is a genuine problem of reconciliation. But the typical well-off Christian thinks there is no problem. He thinks he's rich/privileged because he's a Christian! He thinks it's because God loves him in a special way. He thinks it's the reward for his virtue and labor. He thinks God has exalted him because of all this.

– 27:00

The only problem is that somebody beat us to this sort of thinking. It was the people of God in the Old Testament. They, too, thought God created them to be the recipients of all that blessing, but God destroyed them. Will this be our fate? Yes, unless we repent of our sins and live as reconciling agents of a reconciling Lord. A God who cares cannot be preached by a church that doesn't. It's impossible to preach the message of a suffering servant savior to a world that knows all about us. The first thing we must do is prove that, as the white, wealthy people of the US, we will join the rest of the human race, who are poor and of color. This would be

reconciliation.

– 28:30

So far, I've spoken about reconciliation within the church and reconciliation between the church and the world, so let's turn to one other area: reconciliation within the tensions of the world, person/person, nation/nation. We misunderstand our role. We think of ourselves as peace lovers. But we live in places where there is no peace. We want peace and wonder why others don't want to join us, peace lovers.

We are peace lovers, and we wish everyone else loved peace, too. But life is not about peace-loving, it is about peacemaking. Jesus did not just love peace; he made peace with the blood of the cross. He said Blessed are the peacemakers, which leaves out most of us.

Peacemaking is another name for reconciliation. We operate under a misconception of what Christian love is. We think it's just about being nice to everybody, but in moments of tension, this immobilizes us from taking sides. Then someone will get mad at me, so I must stand above the struggle and hope the trouble will disappear. This is not Christian love.

Father Huddleston, an Anglican priest, was tossed out of South Africa because he spoke up repeatedly against apartheid and the atrocities of the South African government. A friend came to him one day and said, "Huddleston, why don't you have a little patience and extend a little love to your brothers and sisters in Christ? Huddleson replied: "If I were the victim, I'd do this, at least I think I would. I understand that's the right thing to do. But if somebody else is the victim, that's an entirely different situation… It is easy to be kind and patient and understanding at the expense of cruelty and injustice to somebody else." We've been doing this for one long, long time. And we called it Christian love, forgetting there's no love without justice. Love must go beyond justice; it cannot fall below justice. Genuine peacemaking involves taking sides - with the exploited over the exploiter, the victim over the oppressor, those who suffer infliction over those who inflict it.

-- 35.53 minutes/seconds into the talk

To think otherwise is an insult to the Bible and to the Lord Jesus, who was killed on a cross precisely because he disturbed, upset, divided, and made people mad.

The difference between Christian troublemaking and sinful troublemaking is radical. Christian troublemaking operates out of a love for God and his righteousness, and is not prompted by hostility or bitterness. Christian troublemaking seeks justice and the betterment of others and the humiliation of nobody, not even those who bitterly resent what is happening. Christian troublemaking is, in some circumstances, a form of peacemaking.

Regarding American international policy, all sides can agree upon these things.

– 37:45

- We don't want a foreign policy based on fear/hate.
- …. Or one that is rigid and unbending, expressing the pride of virtue and pride of power

that damned Israel in the Old Testament.

- We want a foreign policy that accepts JFK's quote, "never negotiate from fear but never fear to negotiate."
- We want more regional organizations with other nations, rather than operating unilaterally as a self-appointed judge/jury.

My thesis has been that the gospel is the power of God unto reconciliation, but the church is not a good agent of reconciliation.

It was never God's idea that America was to be a lovely little oasis in a sea of poverty and turmoil. It was never God's idea that the white race should be the master race of America, reserving to itself all the benefits of the country. It was never God's idea that we should "build a sweet little nest, shut out the distressed, and let the rest of the world go by" (lyrics from Jimmy Dean's song, 'Let the Rest of the World Go By')

God's idea is clear in the New Testament, Eph 1.10 (And this is the plan: "At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth." Everything is about restoring his determined intention and restoring his creation and healing the brokenness of sin that impacts everything.

Our job is to become reconciling agents of this reconciling God.

– 42:40