

John 4:1-26
Reconciliation Sunday
Reflections on Reconciliation
September 24, 2017
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*(Be Reconciled Slide)

Today is Reconciliation Sunday. Reconciliation is the restoration of a relationship or relationships to wholeness. Wholeness encompasses everything that encourages us to become fully who we were created to be; good health, belonging, opportunity, love. Reconciliation is a tall order. Brokenness is everywhere. Certainly, ***a single*** Reconciliation Sunday will not repair all the brokenness that exists in the world, but this day gives us the opportunity to acknowledge the need for reconciliation, look brokenness in the face, and commit to the important work that God is calling us to.

Part of my sermon prep this week took me to John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park in Tulsa. I visited the park one other time, while in seminary, when I was taking a class called Religion and the Civil Rights Movement. The adjunct professor who taught the class, Rev. Dr. Ray Owens, in addition to teaching at Phillips, is the senior minister of Metropolitan Baptist Church in Tulsa. One day, Rev. Dr. Owens loaded the class up, in one of his church vans, for a tour of a number of places in and around Tulsa. One of those places was the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park.

When I visited the park that day, I knew I wanted to visit again and spend more time there. So, Wednesday afternoon I did that. It is a beautiful, quiet place. If you haven't visited it, I encourage you to do so. I found myself quite emotional as I wandered around, taking pictures, looking at statues, and reading plaques.

*There is a bronze tower in the center of the park that traces the history of African Americans in Oklahoma from 1541-the present. The images on the tower include the one on the front of your bulletin this morning. All around the tower are plaques which highlight significant moments in Oklahoma history which are pictured on the tower. In addition to the tower, there is a healing walkway for visitors to walk as they reflect on the contents of the park. The walkway is lined with hedges and reminds me of a labyrinth.

However, viewing the three bronze statues that stand at the entrance to the park is, in my opinion, worth the drive and so much more. The statues are called Hostility, Humiliation, and Hope, and they are magnificent. So, this morning, as we reflect on this world's need for reconciliation and our role in bringing it about, my remarks will be organized around the sins of hostility and humiliation and the imperative of hope.

*Our text today is from the Gospel of John and is the story of Jesus' interaction with a woman from Samaria.

⁵ So Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)^[b] ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but

those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.”¹⁷ The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you^[c] say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I am he,^[d] the one who is speaking to you.”

In this story, the author of John makes a point of telling the reader that Jesus arrived at the well at noon. Presumably, Jesus and the Samaritan woman are the only two at the well. Why? Noon was not the ideal time to go to the well. The sun is high in the sky and it’s hot. In all likelihood, the other women had come to the well earlier in the day when it was cooler. Why would this unnamed woman choose to wait to go to the well until this time of the day?

Later in the text, we learn that the woman has had a number of husbands and is currently residing with a man who is not her husband. Clearly, the woman's life had not been an easy one. Maybe her husbands died, maybe they divorced her. We don't know who the man she lives with is. A lot of unknowns. What we do know is that she comes to the well alone, not with female companions.

*Here's the thing, the well wasn't just a place to get water. It was a meeting place...a place where women would have asked each other about their families, maybe complained about their husbands leaving their tunics on the floor right next to the hamper, rather than putting them in the hamper. But the woman in this story avoided the company of these women. I wonder if she used to go to the well earlier and had not been welcomed. What had the other women said to her? Had they whispered behind her back? Hostility.

*This is the Hostility statue at the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park. On the park's website, the statue is described, "A white man armed for assault." Knowing the park was created to memorialize the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, I knew exactly who the man was preparing to assault... the people in Greenwood, an all- black neighborhood in Tulsa.

*More than 300 black people were killed in less than 24 hours. A mob destroyed 35 square blocks of the African-American community. Homes and businesses left standing were looted. It started because an African American man, Dick Rowland, was accused of raping a white woman, Sarah Page. After Rowland was arrested, angry white vigilantes gathered at the courthouse intent on lynching Rowland. Armed blacks joined the mob to protect him. There was a scuffle between a black man and a white man, a shot rang out. The crowd scattered. It was about 10:00 a.m. on May 31st. The massacre had begun. Hostility.

*In the story of Jesus at the well, he asked the woman for a drink, which surprised her. He was Jewish, she was Samaritan. Jesus explained

that if she knew who he really was, she would be asking him for living water and she would never be thirsty again. The woman wanted what Jesus was offering and said so. Jesus invited her to go get her husband and come back. "I have no husband," she said. "...you have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband," Jesus said. There it was. He knew all about her. Humiliation.

*This is the Humiliation statue. It is described, "A black man with his hands raised in surrender." I wish the picture was better. I wish you could see the carefully crafted expression on the man's face. His eyes are downcast. He has been in this position before. He is accustomed to doing what he is told, carefully. His face isn't angry. It is resigned. When I was looking at the statue in the park, I found myself wondering what it would have felt like to assume this position while his children and wife looked on...and how many times they had witnessed that. Humiliation.

I wondered about Dick Rowland who had been accused of the crime. Is this how he looked when he was taken into custody? How he must have feared for his life as he was arrested. He probably knew that the accusation alone was enough. He knew to them he was an animal, preying on a vulnerable white woman. The wheels of justice would never turn on his behalf. Humiliation.

*For the Samaritan woman at the well, and for anyone who has ever felt the humiliation of stigmatization, or the pain of being "the other", this story is good news. It is good news because Jesus did not turn away from this woman that was so much a "nobody" that she was never named. He didn't turn away from her, but instead engaged her in conversation, took her seriously, and responded to her with compassion. Jesus crossed significant societal boundaries of religion, ethnicity, and gender to invite her into relationship, to share living water with her. Hope.

*This is the hope statue. The description of this statue is, “The white director of the Red Cross, holding a black baby.” The white man, the one who holds, power, position, and privilege, tenderly holds a black baby, the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. He is quite the contrast to the image of hostility right next to him in the park. Armed with a blanket and not a gun, he holds the baby protectively, his face relaxed and smiling. Hope.

The Hope statue is the only one that includes two people. This statue suggests a relationship that is nonexistent in the other statues. It is in relationship that we find reconciliation. It is in relationship that we find hope. We will not find reconciliation in hostility. Hostility keeps us at arms-length from one another. It keeps us from listening to and believing the experiences of our brothers and sisters. It keeps us going to the well at different times, avoiding each other. We will not find reconciliation in humiliation. Humiliation makes equity and justice impossible. Humiliation is control. It is shame and keeps our brothers and sisters from becoming who they were created to be. It causes us to whisper about each other, use Twitter and Facebook to call each other names and spew hate. Hostility and Humiliation aren't just statues in a park, they are part of life for far too many human beings today.

*This week in St. Louis, peaceful protests took place in response to the acquittal of a former police officer, Jason Stockley, who was charged with the 2011 murder of Anthony Lamar Smith, a black man.

*The police responded to the peaceful protests with riot gear.

*Later in the evening, the protests did turn violent and led to vandalism. This is not the first time violence has erupted in our streets as a result of a verdict in a case in which a police officer has killed a black man. There is hostility on all sides, we scream at each other, “Black Lives Matter, no Blue Lives Matter, wait, All Lives Matter. What about black on black crime...why isn't anyone protesting that? Black

people need to do what they're told when confronted by police officers. Their violent behavior does nothing for their cause."

The problem is racism. Whether Stockley or any other police officer, killed a black man on purpose is not the real issue. Whether we think the protests are appropriate or not is not the issue either. The real issue is that, in this country, if you are black, you are more likely to live in poverty, be stopped by police, be wrongly convicted, go to prison, be killed by police, and die young. You are less likely to finish high school, go to college, vote, get approved for a mortgage, have pain medication prescribed in the ER, and have a bystander stop to help you in an emergency. It is all of these things, and more, that have created an atmosphere where peaceful protests by black people are met with armed resistance. It is this atmosphere that has frustrated and angered our black brothers and sisters for decades.

*We don't want Colin Kaepernick, and others, to take a knee during the national anthem in protest of the racism in this country. We don't like it when black people peacefully assemble to protest racism, we don't want black people to shout Black Lives Matter. We say we are tired of hearing about white privilege and that talking about racism sows seeds of division...we should just move forward. Exactly how would we like our black brothers and sisters to confront that which has been oppressing them since this country was founded? Sometimes I fear the answer is, "We don't."

*In August, in Charlottesville, Virginia, a group of clergy and activists gathered to pray in response to planned demonstrations by white supremacists.

*While in the church, the building was surrounded by individuals carrying torches, shouting, "White lives matter," "Blood and soil," and "You will not replace us." United Church of Christ Executive Minister of Justice and Witness, Rev. Traci Blackmon reported that police officers

shut down the prayer service fearing they could no longer guarantee the safety of the worshipers.

*Where are the police in riot gear in this picture?

In fact, the police in Charlottesville were criticized for their handling of the situation. The commentary from communities of color in Charlottesville is that the police have never protected them. Brittany Caine-Conley, chief organizer of a Charlottesville clergy group writes, "While the police force says they're trying to protect the community, it's been very evident to me that the most marginalized and oppressed people have never been safe and have never been protected."

Hostility. Humiliation. Sometimes it seems not much has changed since the 1920's. Or since Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. marched Selma to Montgomery, since Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus, or since 4 college students sat down at the lunch counter at Woolworths. And refusing to talk about it, refusing to listen to experiences that are different from our own, will not make racism go away. Now is the time to recommit ourselves to reconciliation, to righting relationships between one group and "the other." Now is the time to join our brothers and sisters and unwaveringly proclaim, "You are not alone."

The work of reconciliation can be seen in these glimpses of hope in our world.

*The Reconciliation Ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) just launched a program called *One Bag of Tea, One Conversation, One Relationship*. Participants are invited to join the movement towards wholeness and embark on the journey of breaking down the walls that separate us by strengthening the bonds that make us one. The idea is simple: 1) invite someone or a group to share a cup of tea preferably somebody or somebodies you would like to know more about. For example, we could choose someone or a whole congregation that is different from us in race, culture or faith tradition. Then pick a date and

location and begin to build relationships. Reconciliation Ministry even has special tea bags with questions on them to help get us started. Hope.

*And from tea to beer. The people who make Heineken beer have produced a video titled, *Worlds Apart*. The premise of the video is that, people with vastly different world views, given the opportunity to really get to know one another, will choose to sit down face to face, with a beer (or cup of tea), and try to understand the other person's point of view. The video is 4 ½ minutes long. I would love to show it to you right now, but we are limited by time. I encourage you to watch it at home.

*Type Heineken World Apart in your Google search bar. Let me know what you think. Hope.

And last, I don't want to give us a pass on doing the work we need to do to bring about reconciliation. It's work we are called to. Work that is life giving and life saving. I do want share a picture that inspires me to continue this work and reminds me that the future has very bright prospects.

*This picture was taken at the Montessori preschool in Bloomington, IL. It was the first day of school this fall. The little boy on the right in my grandson, Kane. These little boys don't know it, but they are leading the way for all of us.

*The only hope for reconciliation is in relationships. Relationship is what Jesus offered the Samaritan woman at the well. Relationship is what we have to offer as well. May today be the beginning of saying yes, over and over, to new relationships and the hope that springs from them. Amen.