

Bridging the Divide...

SERMON TEXT: 2 Cor. 5:14-21

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Dearly beloved of God, disciples of His Christ, our sermon's text is taken from the fifth chapter of 2 Corinthians, which reads as follows:

The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and He died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him who knew no sin to be sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

Beloved in the Lord, let us pray...

In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who sought us and bought us with His precious blood, we come before You, our Heavenly Father, sealed by Your Spirit, as Your children, as brothers and sisters, beseeching You to speak to us anew through Your Word, Your Gospel of Reconciliation by way of Christ's holy cross. Prepare our ears to hear and our hearts to receive Your truth. Touch my lips, O Lord, that I might speak of the wonders of Your Son in whom, by whom, and for whom we are united. AMEN.

There were two brothers named John and James. They were both strong-willed men who worked the earth on adjoining plots of land that they had inherited from their father, in accord with his will. As brothers, they shared their respective resources so as to ensure that they each prospered as they worked their portion of land. All went well until one day when they had words over a matter that, in retrospect, was neither here nor there. Nevertheless, they deeply hurt each other with their words. When more serious matters arose, as such matters often do, they then allowed the insults of the past to inflame the situations that followed thereafter. As a result, they eventually withdrew from one another's company altogether. The wounds they inflicted through their words were left to fester. Their resentment towards each other grew, and grew, and grew with every rising and setting of the sun. They no longer shared their resources. They no longer shared much of anything other than their common blood and their bitterness. Now, one day, as the sun rose early in the morning, a carpenter came to John's door looking for work. John welcomed the carpenter into his home and began to tell the tale of the troubles that he had to endure with his brother as his neighbour. John then took the carpenter out into the fields, by the border of his land, to show him the latest insult and injury to the bond he once shared with his brother. At the edge of John's property there was a newly formed creek, dividing the once adjoining plots of land. John turned to the carpenter and said, "My brother, Jimmy, did this out of spite! Oh, if only our father could see what his son did— against all his expressed wishes— to the meadow that is between our plots of land. He went and took his bulldozer and carved a path for the creek you now see in front of you. He did this because he thinks he knows better than anyone what we ought to do with the land we were given. Well, okay, then I'll do him one better: I want you to make for me a fence so high that I'll never have

to see him or his piece of our father's land ever again!" With a simple nod, the carpenter then gathered his materials and set out to work. He laboured all day with no rest until his work was done. He then walked once more to John's door. He told John that his work was done. John was delighted to hear the news and went out with the carpenter to inspect his work. Arriving at the border, by the newly formed creek, John was taken aback to find that instead of a fence the carpenter built a bridge. Now, at that time, James happened to be out in the field and he saw the bridge that spanned the creek. He was so moved by what he thought was a gesture of good will from his brother John that he quickly ran toward the bridge with tears streaming down his cheeks. John looked into the eyes of the carpenter beside him, and then across the way at his brother, and he understood. John met James upon the bridge... and the brothers embraced each other. At that moment, the perceived wrongs of the past were neither here nor there. In their embrace their father's greatest hope, as is the case with any father, was being realized. Baptized in each others tears, these brothers were brought together on the bridge that the carpenter built — the very bridge by which they were now able to cross over the bitter waters that had separated them for far too long. Reunited, they were ready to take the first steps toward travelling together on the road to restoration and reconciliation.

Isn't it interesting how we act and react when we perceive that we've been wronged, whether rightly or wrongly? Isn't it interesting how, most often, the transgressions of which we ourselves are guilty go unnoticed in our own sight while the very same transgression against us by another person goes without pardon? When we've been wronged, there is the very real temptation to hold a grudge, to seek revenge, and to cry out for justice. Yet, what if perfect justice came upon all of us at the stroke of midnight tonight? Would anyone of us be left

standing at one minute past? I wouldn't. Would you? The truth is that if God, the only one who could mete out justice perfectly, were to, in fact, do so, we would all be doomed. That's the bad news. Of course, the good news is that God has not yet come seeking justice, but, through His Son, He has come to justify sinners like you, and like me. God, in Christ, has come in grace and mercy. While justice demands that we all get what we deserve for our transgressions against one another and, first and foremost, against God Himself, grace is His giving to us what we do not deserve as His mercy withholds from us what we do indeed deserve. The cross is where God's justice intersects with His grace and mercy. Yes, with two pieces of lumber and three nails the carpenter from Nazareth built the bridge by which we are forgiven. Yet, *why* does God forgive sins? Why ought *we* also forgive sins? What is the *purpose* of forgiveness? The answer is simple. The reason for forgiveness is that it is for the sake of reconciliation, the restoration of relationships.

Sin separates us from God as we turn away from Him, seeking our own self-centred ways. Sin also separates us from one another. Sin is why our relationships suffer. The first to suffer was that with our Maker; the second was with our fellow man. St. Paul tells us that the old relationship which Adam and Eve ruined in their disobedience, which we in turn as their offspring have inherited, has now been restored through Christ—made new as God was reconciling the world to Himself. In so doing, we Christians now live no longer for ourselves but for Him who for our sake died and was raised to bridge the divide between us. The divide of sin—the canyon we carved through our thoughts, words, and deeds, against a holy God—could not be crossed apart from Christ's cross. Only God could bridge the gap and bring us

back to Himself. In so doing, He has not only restored our relationship with Himself, but also with one another. We are now united by and in Christ Jesus.

Being united to Christ, His message of the reconciliation made possible through His sacrifice has become entrusted to us for the sake of all those yet to hear this great news. This is the ministry of the Gospel. It is the ministry of reconciliation. Yet, while we go out into the world as His ambassadors, how well do we represent the message we carry to the world in our *own* lives? Are we reconciled with one another? Or do we *still* harbour resentment towards our brothers and sisters in Christ or our neighbours? For the sake of the world, God has given His Church the ministry of reconciliation through His Word of Law and Gospel. For the sake of the Church, He has given us, alongside His Word and Sacraments, the Office of the Keys. He has given His Church men called to minister in His stead, to hear His people's confessions and pronounce His forgiveness to them. Indeed, in both corporate and private confession it is God Himself who—through those He sent and sends to serve you—pronounces forgiveness in keeping with His promise. St. John wrote that, “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” This is most certainly true. Yet, while all sins are ultimately against God, there remain the sins we have committed against each other. God certainly will forgive us these trespasses; however, He does so for the purpose of mending the relationships that our sins have rent to pieces. Now, through His forgiveness, we find peace with God and, through our confession, we should seek peace with each other by admitting the guilt we can no longer bear nor bury—it's time to be reconciled with those we've wronged. Jesus said, “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and

go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” God, much more than even any earthly father, desires that His children be reconciled to one another. No father wants to see his children quarrel and further foster resentment toward one another. How much more is this the case with God, our Heavenly Father! St. Paul, guided by the very Spirit of God, wrote, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” He also wrote that we should not “let the sun go down on [our] anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.”

Therefore we ought to hear God’s word of warning to us because Satan would seek to separate us not only from God, but from each other. Sure, confessing our sins to one another for the purpose of reconciliation is no simple task, but nobody said that it would be easy.

Brothers and sisters, the cross that cost our Lord His life has given us life so as to bridge the divide of sin which separated us from our God and, in turn, one another. The cross was the instrument by which our Lord achieved His purpose among His people: our reconciliation. He laid down His life to raise us up anew, in a right relationship with Himself and each other. Let us ever bear in mind what He bore upon Himself in order to bring about such a reconciliation. Let us then forgive those who’ve trespassed against us as we ourselves have been forgiven by the God against whom we’ve trespassed too many times to count. God provided a cross to bridge the divide. He gave us a bridge to cross over to Him so as to be reconciled and made whole, made new. United to Christ, we too are to be bridge-builders through the ministry of reconciliation that has been entrusted to us. Yet, let us not forget that, as we’ve been forgiven much, we too must be prepared to forgive much and to seek forgiveness from those in our midst. God gives us access to such forgiveness through the means of grace given to His Church. Let us thereby confess our sins and hear Christ’s own absolution. Then, in peace, let

us make peace with our brother. In humility, let us set out to meet one another on the bridge the carpenter from Nazareth fashioned for us. After all, when we gather together in the Lord's house— especially when we do so around His altar, His table— we do so in order to feast upon that heaven-sent Word which vivifies us it reconciles us, restoring us within our most fundamental relationship. It's what it's all about. It's the crux of Christianity. It's the message meant to feed the masses with that which alone can satisfy mankind's most profound hunger. It's about the price paid to bring about peace with God, and, through such peace, one another. It's the heart of the message that holds us, and it's the message we've been entrusted to hold before one another: God's Christ *crucified* for the reconciliation of the world which He so loves.

John and James stood there on the bridge for a long time weeping over the ill will they once bore for each other. Together they mourned the years that were eaten away by resentment and they forgave one another, right there on that spot, standing on the bridge. Together they asked for God's forgiveness as they embraced each other. Together they returned to their father's desire for his sons. They thanked God for their new beginning, and then they turned to the carpenter to thank him for what he had done for them by building the bridge. In gratitude, the brothers asked him to stay and they offered to hire him, but the carpenter just looked at them, smiled, and as he walked away he said, "There are still many more bridges to build." AMEN.

May the peace of God keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN.