



## DO RED AND BLUE MAKE PURPLE?

February 12, 2017, The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

I Corinthians 3: 1-9; Matthew 5: 21-25a

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Theme: Christ invites and empowers reconciliation.

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*Open our hearts to your word in Holy Scripture, O God. Silence in us any voice but your own. Till our hearts with your comforting and discomfoting truth so that your word might take root, grow green and strong, and flower into a life beautifully lived. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

Following this sermon, we'll stand and say a "Confession of Faith." Today's is taken from a document named *The Confession of 1967*. It's 50 years old this year. This Confession of '67 is one of eleven official faith statements of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the denomination of which Brick Church is a part. Two of those eleven are very ancient, dating from the Fourth Century; many of them date from the Reformation; three of them, including "'67," are relatively recent.

Presbyterians have a nuanced relationship with their collection of official faith statements, documents sometimes called "creeds" or "confessions." Some other denominations have official faith statements that everybody's required to sign on to – every jot and tittle – in order to be a member. Other denominations eschew faith statements entirely. When you join a Presbyterian Church, you're asked only to "trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior." That may be terse, but it's an immensely weighty little sentence.

Presbyterian leaders, however – whether ministers, elders or deacons – are asked about that collection of eleven faith statements. We're *not* asked to subscribe to them in every detail. Frankly, there are portions of some of them that I cannot



affirm. But we *are* asked to affirm the “essential tenets” of those eleven statements. But most importantly, the “essential tenets” are deliberately left undefined.

So Presbyterians are required to attend closely to our faith statements, but not necessarily to subscribe to them in every detail. I like to think we’re like a ship that has an anchor firmly set, holding us in place in all the winds that can blow the church this way and that, but the anchor line is plenty long and has some give and take.

So back to Confession of 1967, the faith statement a piece of which we’ll say in a few minutes. It was written and subsequently approved during one of the most tumultuous and deeply divided eras in American history – the 1960’s. The country – and the churches of the country – were being ripped apart in those years, divided by a host of hot-button issues: civil rights, civil disobedience, school desegregation, the sexual revolution, recreational drugs, urban unrest, the Viet Nam War, women’s rights and later gay rights, not to mention bell-bottom trousers and really long hair.

It’s easy now – 50 years later – to look back and forget how profoundly divided and furiously angry the country was, how deeply divided and angry churches were. Doug King and I were talking the other day, and he told me how the congregation in Buffalo that he’d served before coming to Brick had been ripped apart by Viet Nam and, later, gay rights issues. This was before his time there, but that great congregation was so divided that hundreds of members left the church. In the end, it went from 2,000 to 1,000 members.

It was into just this cauldron of division and anger that *The Confession of 1967* was written. The single, overarching, and brave theme of this document can be summed up in one word – *reconciliation*. Today, exactly fifty years later, the confession of ‘67 is again immediately and hauntingly relevant. Fifty years later, our nation, and so many churches, are again divided and again, there is anger. Yet again, half a century later, the impossibly possible challenge before us is the same – *reconciliation*.



Reconciliation is a thoroughly Biblical concept. In the first book of the Old Testament, Genesis, feuding brothers reconcile time and again – even after having done really awful things to each other. In the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament, in the Sermon on the Mount from which Davis just read, Jesus implores reconciliation: *“if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you.... Be reconciled... Come to terms quickly with your accuser.”* Reconciliation is core theme of the letters Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. In the second Bible passage Davis read, Paul outlines the divisions that are tearing that little congregation apart: *“...there is jealousy and quarrelling among you...”* he writes, *“for one says, ‘I belong to Paul, and another, ‘I belong to Apollos.’”* Paul’s referring to rival groups in the church, groups that had identified with two different preachers – himself and one Apollos. They were locked in some bitter, unidentified, now long-forgotten fight.

The moral weight of both of the letters to the Corinthians is one long and passionate appeal for *reconciliation*. Paul’s appeal reaches its crescendo later in the correspondence, in the Fifth Chapter of II Corinthians, where he writes these familiar words: *“...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 gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”* These are the words, by the way, that formed the Biblical foundation of *The Confession of 1967*. That confession was needful fifty years ago; it’s needful again today in a context that seems as divided as then.

Reconciliation is the impossible possibility that our country aches for.  
Reconciliation is the impossible possibility that our churches ache for.  
Reconciliation is the impossible possibility that our families ache for.  
Call me unrealistic, but I’d offer three observations about reconciliation which – taken together – do, I pray, make the impossible possible.

First, remember that reconciliation has both a vertical dimension and a horizontal dimension. Paul wrote about the world being reconciled first to God (that’s the vertical dimension, if you will), and then about the earthly work of reconciliation



that we are charged with. This is reconciliation with other people, reconciliation in the world (that's the horizontal dimension).

These two dimensions are intimately connected. The one is needful of the other. If I know that I've been forgiven and accepted by God in spite of myself, I'm impelled to forgive and accept others in spite of themselves. Vertical reconciliation impels horizontal reconciliation.

This is the veracity that we enact at the beginning of every worship service here at Brick. In the unison Prayer of Confession, we own up to our wrongs and are assured of God's forgiveness, that is to say, we are accepted and reconciled to God (that's the vertical). And then, just as Paul suggested, we turn to each other and offer the peace of Christ to one another (that's the horizontal).

Secondly, remember that reconciliation is not the same thing as agreement. I can and do love, respect and be reconciled to people I don't agree with. (That better be true, because I don't imagine I totally agree with anybody!) To be reconciled is to love the other even though you see things differently – anything from politics, to theology, to how to spend your money, to the color you're going to paint the kitchen. In fact, the deeper truth is that I actually *need* people I don't agree with. I need people whose politics are not mine. I need Roman Catholics, Jews, Muslims and atheists whose theology is not mine. Uncomfortable as it may sometimes be, I'm a better, more mature, more insightful person for being in relationship with people I don't agree with.

Our Thursday morning's Men's Bible Study is a perfect illustration. We're all male and all Christian, but that's about where the commonality ends. Our theology, our politics, our taste in movies are all over the map. But it's *not* a problem; it's the opposite of a problem. The group is immeasurably richer for it. We banter in joyful, often playful, reconciliation in spite of our differences. We know that what we have in common in Jesus Christ is so vastly more central to who we are than anything else.



Thirdly and lastly, I've been calling reconciliation in a time of explosive divisiveness the "impossible possibility." It may be that it is in fact impossible – impossible *on our own*, that is. Human reconciliation is goaded and empowered by the Presence of That-Which-Is-Beyond-Us. God, can make the impossible possible. Again and again in my life, I have found that I can only do that which I didn't think I could ever do by the power of The-One-Who-Is-Greater-Than-I.

In several recent sermons, I have quipped that Brick, like most large congregations, is a "purple church." That is to say, we're neither all red nor all blue. We're a mixture of the two – purple. I did not invent this metaphor; I stole it from another minister who also serves a purple church. Anyway, the second time I used it, my wife, who is a painter, told me there was a problem with the image. She said that if an artist mixes red paint and purple paint together, what you generally end up with is not purple, but a muddy shade of dark brown. I protested that the color wheel says red and blue make purple. "Theoretically maybe," she answered. At which point she went and got some tubes of paint, red and blue, and mixed them together on a piece of cardboard, yielding – you guessed it – a muddy shade of dark brown.

I was crestfallen. "You have slain my metaphor!" I cried. "Not really," she said, "You can still get purple. You mix red and blue paint, and then you add a very bright, light color like chrome white." She did just that on the cardboard, and, *voila* – purple. "So," I asked, "What's the light and bright color you just added going to stand for in my purple church metaphor?"

"How about God," she said.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*