

Text: *Psalms 85: 10-11* Mercy and truth have met together;

Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

Truth shall spring up from the earth,

And righteousness shall look down from heaven.

THE FOUR PILLARS OF RECONCILIATION

I am an eternal optimist. The glass is always full – water and air, both of which are essential to life. My optimism sometimes leads to errors. My back bears a few scars of wounds made by people I trusted, and I consistently underestimate the number of miles between stops when I am on a road trip and the number of calories when I am on an eating trip. But, generally speaking, I tend to take a positive view of humankind and our institutions. Whether speaking of interpersonal relationships, families, communities, nations or relations among nations, it grieves me to see dysfunctional conflict tearing at the heart of relationships. That is why I think that reconciliation is a ministry that must be regarded as primary to the wellbeing of both the church and the state as well as to the individuals making up those institutions.

The Psalmist points us in the right direction. The four pillars are: Mercy, Truth, Righteousness and Peace. I don't think that the linkages are accidental. "Mercy and Truth have met together." Certainly, we cannot be reconciled with one another unless there is a foundation of truth. Lies always create conflict and disunity. Truth is the answer to lies, but for reconciliation to take place it must be linked to mercy. We can use truth as a bludgeon to subdue people who lie. That is what is going on when we say that "I would like to knock some sense into that person." That is exactly what I want to do when someone rejects data-based arguments for ideological/emotion-based ones. One can be right and overbearing. Nothing like beating someone over the head with facts to give you a good feeling of superiority!

Now, we know why the Psalmist links truth with mercy. If truth is to refute lies and still contribute to reconciliation, it must be wrapped in mercy. Mercy includes context. Why is the truth a truth? What process was used to produce the truth? Mercy also includes weighing and taking into consideration the psychological costs for the person who had accepted the lies. "I don't know how you could be so stupid", does not show mercy. If reconciliation is your goal, then the psychological costs to the person enmeshed in lies, needs to be calculated and reduced.

Mercy and truth may have met together, but righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Why did the Psalmist have righteousness and peace making out? Possibly because if peace isn't linked with righteousness, then self-righteousness may well ensue, and no hope of reconciliation could exist. For those of us who possess the truth, whether the truth is a product of the scientific method or a product of spiritual belief, a very fine line separates righteousness from self-righteousness.

At the spiritual level righteousness is God's approval and blessing. From a secular perspective, righteousness is "acting in an upright and moral way." Self-righteousness exists when we use our spiritual faith to force upon others our belief in a particular set of secular presumed facts or truths. The culture wars are an excellent example. Abortion, sexual identity, and Christian nationalism are all skirmishes in the cultural wars. As long as public policy or religious choices are framed in military terms

as victories or defeats, no reconciliation can take place. Peace must kiss righteousness. Whether one is talking about the current state of the Methodist Church or the state of the union, peace must precede reconciliation, not simply be a result of the reconciliation process. Peace is not the product of reconciliation; it is the prerequisite to reconciliation. Self-righteous people refuse to participate in the reconciliation process. They have no need to. Their whole psychological edifice and their view of spiritual reality is held to be the only way. Their war must be won, or all is lost. The language of war must be stilled before peace and righteousness can kiss.

Reconciliation is a ministry for all of us. Mercy, truth, righteousness and peace. These are the gifts of God, made real by the actions of humans. Let us close this meditation with a prayer from Thomas Merton.

Oh God, we are one with You. You have made us one with You. You have taught us that if we are open to one another, You dwell in us. Help us to preserve this openness and to fight for it with all our hearts. Help us to realize that there can be no understanding where there is mutual rejection. Oh God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, full, completely, we accept You, and we thank You, and we adore you, and we love You with our whole being, because our being is in Your being, our spirit is rooted in Your spirit. Fill us then with love and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways, united in this one spirit which makes You present in the world, and which makes You witness to the ultimate reality that is love. Love has overcome. Love is victorious. Amen.