

"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation . . . All this is from God, who reconciled us to Godself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation . . . So we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:17-18, 20)

I picture purgatory as something like the main lobby of my hometown's public library. It was last renovated around 1976, and it was very slick at the time. The concrete walls are studded with enough pebbles to suggest a sort of anonymous, orderly stone. Around low glass tables are grouped a few leather sling chairs, once sleek, now run-down and hard to adjust to. A tang of mildew lingers in the flat gray carpet. The ceilings are quite high, the source of the room's functional fluorescent lighting. Although huge, the space feels neither empty nor full, but well and thoroughly used. There are always people sitting around, doing whatever they have to, sometimes speaking to a librarian, mostly busy with their own thoughts.

The trick is, in purgatory, I know all those people. We could be talking to each other, but none of us wants to. That's why we're there. Purgatory, for me, is being trapped in a room with all the awkward, unresolved conflict left over from your life. The roommates I left on bad terms with; the Cheneys and the Bushes of the world. Everyone, great and small, who's been an occasion for the sun to go down on my anger. Each of them needs to hear my complaint, and I have to hear theirs, and somehow we have to work it out. Each of us leaves this purgatory when we've reached some workable consensus on our all differences,

maybe not an agreement, but something we can live with. We couldn't do it here below, but after death, we've got nothing but time.

A friend of mine in college once asked why I wanted to go to heaven with a guy like Pat Robertson. I gave my friend a pretty useless answer, full of theology, about how a heaven with clouds and harps isn't Biblical. Now, that answer was true: God's plan, in the New Testament, is the resurrected life of a just and beloved community, one we'll share together with all those God has called. But my friend's question is actually more insightful than I gave him credit for. If I can't find room in my beloved community now for Pat Robertson, why would I expect things to be any different in the world to come?

Like most of the stories we tell about the afterlife, the story I just told about purgatory is really about the present. Every day, I carry around conflict that I can't expect to resolve. There are people long vanished from my life whose memory can quiet my joy and return me to an old and fruitless anger. Perhaps I could, through prayer and patience, come to forgive many of these people for my part. Even then, though, our fights would still have left their scars on my soul.

Paul calls us in today's epistle to the ministry of reconciliation. In Christ, he says, all things have been made new. Anyone who is in Christ has become a new creation, a new person, part of the wholeness God has in store for the world. That implies, in turn, that we have to be reconcilers. We have a calling, a ministry, to make that wholeness real in our relationships and in our society.

This call has been my personal mission statement for years.

Reconciliation is my watchword. If there is a divide in this world, I feel an urgent need to bridge it. That mission is why I came out in an evangelical church in college. I knew there was something missing in my gospel, and I felt called to stand in that gap. That mission is why I traveled to Kenya last summer with a mixed group of progressive and conservative Christians. In mission and service, we could find what we had in common.

Of course, I can't bring about reconciliation single-handedly. I can't just square the circle, any more than anyone else. Yet I also know that all the work, even the parts that produce no visible results, is pushing my vocation forward and helping bring life to the world.

As the prodigal was sitting in his own personal purgatory, the waiting room of his pigpen, Jesus says "he came to himself". His sense of who he was, of his rightful place in the world, had returned to him. His desire to be reconciled to those he was closest to was an outgrowth of his true identity. He became ready to lay down his self-imposed exile when he realized who God had made him to be, a person in loving and humble relationship with others. For me, that's the good news of this parable, and it's beautiful. It's an image of how God can always call us back to ourselves, how no amount of pain or anger can defeat God's new creation of us in Christ. The older son has stayed home with bitterness, and the younger son has left with anger, but the father can call them both back to themselves.

Henri Nouwen writes that as we approach the story of the prodigal son, it

ultimately doesn't matter whether we identify more with the younger brother who comes home or the older brother who never left. The important thing is to become the father. We can become the one who's waiting for your lost child's return. We can become the one who can give without sparing. We can become the one with love enough to overcome the longest-held bitterness. The reconciler, whom Jesus here names the father, is our identity in Christ. That is who God is making us. That is how God is going to heal the world.

Given my own brokenness, I sometimes find that calling hard to believe. I try not to dwell on the hurts and slights I carry, but those purgatorial moments happen here on earth. I often find myself remembering some long-gone pain someone caused me, or some foolish thing I did. Usually, I'll curse inwardly, at no one in particular, then go about my business, slightly discouraged. That internal monologue of guilt and unforgiveness is the major obstacle to my life as a reconciler, and also my spur to that life. I must reconcile because I must be reconciled, for my own soul's sake.

Paul calls us, last and most of all, to be reconciled to God. That can sound very abstract, but Jesus' story points to something very close to home. In baptism, we are one with Christ and with all Christ's people. Being reconciled to God is also coming back to ourselves, and to those to whom God has called us. In church, we call that repentance, turning around. The good news is, returning to God, returning to ourselves, is very simple. Right here, this morning, we have everything we need to be reconciled to God. We have a special invitation

to draw near to God by coming to God's table.

In the sacraments, we make visible our reconciliation to God and one another. We have a chance to receive God's gifts with thanksgiving—the gifts of bread and wine, and the gift of one another. There is, in the Prayer Book, a special rite of reconciliation, which some people find especially useful during lent. In reality, though, all of our prayer has a chance to be a rite of reconciliation. Every time we pray together, and especially every time we take communion, we have a chance to come back to ourselves, to receive grace to renew our lives, and to turn back to the world in love.

If you feel this morning that your spirit is wandering in a far country, lost or alone, I hope that you'll come to the table, and find Love waiting. If you find yourself living with old pain or bitterness, I hope you too will come to the table this morning and begin to lay it down. As you do, either way, you can be returned to yourself. You'll be made more in the image of the God who has invited you to the table, and has called you to help reconcile everyone to God and one another.

Thanks be to God!