



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Reconciliation: Better Than Forgiveness"

Ron Mathieu

Picture in your minds a beautiful country with a thousand hills.

- where not a single piece of trash can be found littering the ground.
- where more than one million people have been lifted out of poverty.
- and life expectancy has more than doubled in two decades.
- where 95% of the population has health insurance.
- a country that has the highest proportion of women legislators in the world at 64%.
- and one that the Heritage Foundation ranks as one of the top countries for economic freedom.
- a country that Gallup ranks as one of the safest places in the world.

Now some of you may be envisioning Switzerland or Singapore, but you know what? You're way off. You also need to know that in this same country, 21 years ago, close to a million people were slaughtered in just 90 days.

The country I'm referring to is Rwanda! That's right! In 1994 Rwanda experienced a horrible genocide when the ruling Hutus

ordered the eradication of their fellow countrymen the Tutsis.

There are many ways to measure the progress that Rwanda has experienced since then. Instead of death by machete, Rwandans...unlike many of their African neighbors... are now living longer, are better educated and healthier, and are participating actively in local and national politics.

Last February, my wife Angela and I visited Rwanda with the Board of Compassion International, where I've served for the last seven years. We were totally surprised and amazed by this beautiful country—where in 1994 one out of every eight people were slaughtered. That would be equivalent to 40 million Americans being killed in just three months.

1.4 million kids were orphaned or abandoned, compounding the tragedy. The good news is Compassion had been in Rwanda for 14 years when this happened, and was positioned to immediately help. In fact, nearly 73,000 of the 1.6 million Compassion-supported kids worldwide are in Rwanda. It's wonderful to see the transformed lives of kids who have been released from poverty in the name of Jesus!

But my message this morning is not about Compassion International, for despite all the advances of which Rwanda can boast, nearly half of the population still remains below the poverty level. We saw this poverty up close and personal.

The more we learned about the atrocities in 1994, the more I was plagued by the thought of, "How can such evil not only exist in the heart of mankind...but actually be acted out so savagely? How could people who had grown up next to each other, who had played together and gone to school together, and in some cases were even related through marriage... how could they nearly wipe out an entire population group in less time than it takes most of us to complete and submit our income tax return?"

Because based on the first hand stories and the graphic history we learned at the Genocide Museum in Kigali, I cannot imagine that I would ever...EVER...."get over it" had this happened to me. How can human beings fall so low? It bothered me so much I couldn't sleep.

I won't get into the details, but the story of Honore Karuranga and Jean Sengimana is typical. They were childhood best friends until the genocide erupted.

Honore's parents and five cousins were brutally killed. Later he discovered that his best friend Jean participated in the murders!

Stories like this were everywhere. We were horrified to learn that even some churches participated in the atrocities.

Angela and I drove by one infamous church in Kigali where 2,000 Tutsis sought sanctuary. The Hutus were informed about that and all 2,000 were massacred right in the church. This wasn't an isolated incident, The same happened in two other churches holding 1,000 sanctuary-seekers each.

But as much as I was haunted by the genocide, I became even more intrigued by the amazing healing that has happened in this country, as you'll hear.

I wondered, "How could such reconciliation occur in such a short a time, in the face of such horror?"

So this morning we'll look at mankind's capacity for evil, and how, through God's Word and grace, totally-shattered relationships can be restored.

If you brought your Bible turn with me to the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, in the second half of the Bible, to Chapter 5, verse 17.

While you're doing that, let me set the stage for the passage we'll be looking at. One of the early churches that the Apostle Paul established was in Corinth, whose location made it an important trading crossroad. As a result it became a place where numerous cultures and religions came together...often with tolerance, and sometimes with a loud cultural clash.

And as a result, what was happening "in the world" easily and quickly seeped into the beliefs and behaviors of the fledgling Christian church that Paul planted there.

Paul had already chastised this church in an earlier letter because he heard they were practicing pagan rituals, were teaching weird things about Christ's resurrection, and were even getting drunk on Communion wine!

That first letter created such a ruckus that some Corinthian Christians questioned Paul's authority and teachings, prompting him to write this second letter, where he explains that the Good News is all about Jesus, not about Paul or their differences...and that through Jesus we become reborn and reconciled with God. He writes:

2 Cor 5:17-20 *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! **18** All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ... and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: **19** that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. **20** We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us."*

Could this passage help explain the reconciliation that Rwanda has experienced? And can it help us on our spiritual path to learn how to reconcile with those who have hurt us, or those we've hurt?

You might be thinking places like Rwanda or South Africa need such healing and that we don't have such a desperate need for

reconciliation in America. It's true people may not be hacking their neighbors to death with machete but people, we have issues:

- How do we as a nation get beyond Ferguson or Baltimore?

- And I have neighbors who won't talk to each other because one's plumeria leaves are always blowing on the other's lawn!

- I bet many of us know of a father and son who haven't spoken for years.

- Or business deals gone bad that have alienated old friends for the rest of their lives.

- And in many states "irreconcilable differences" are sufficient legal grounds for seeking a divorce.

Consider for a moment the staggering statistic that in the United States there are 1.2 million lawyers. That's one lawyer for every 300 people...and twice as many lawyers as there are pastors.

Don't get me wrong: I have deep respect for lawyers and we have many fine ones in this congregation who are my good friends. Not too long ago I got the opportunity to mention it. I opened my mail to find I'd received a notice to report for jury duty. Now many people dread getting those, but I've always wanted to serve on a jury. However, in the seven times I've been in a jury pool, I've never been selected.

But this time I was seated as the last prospective juror and it looked like I was going to get my wish. The defendant in this trial was a lawyer, so every juror was asked if they personally knew any attorneys.

When they got to me, I said, “I know Chris Pan, Scott Makuakane, Tom Sterling, Peter Starn, Harlan Kimura, Jeff Harris, Jeff Sizemore...”

The prosecutor jumped in at that point and asked: “Whoa there! How come you know so many lawyers?”

I responded, “I work at a church that’s a hospital for sinners.”

The courtroom erupted, and no one laughed harder than the judge, but I was dismissed by the defense’s first pre-emptory challenge!

Back to Corinth. Paul’s letter makes it clear that the Corinthian church wasn’t perfect in New Testament times, and I’m here to tell you ours isn’t today either. We have deep needs for people to reconcile: people in our church, our workplace, our families, and our society.

So what is reconciliation? Is it the same as forgiveness?

The word “reconciliation” comes from the Latin “re” (again) + “concilare” (make friendly) = “bring together again.”

Reconciliation assumes that there was once a relationship that has been broken and has been brought back together again.

“Forgiveness” is different:

- Forgiveness is something I can do by myself.
- It’s one-sided.
- It requires a decision only on the part of the forgiver.
- I can forgive you whether you feel forgiven, accept forgiveness, or even know I’ve forgiven you.

Forgiveness releases me from the burden I carry about you. Pastor Dan likes to define it as giving up one’s right to retaliate. We are called to forgive one another—just as God has forgiven us. But forgiveness doesn’t always result in an automatic restoration of relationship.

Reconciliation, on the other hand, is a two-way street:

- It’s not just letting go of a wrong.
- It’s the restoration of a broken relationship.
- It requires a decision and action by both parties.

I think it’s a higher calling than forgiveness, and in today’s passage Paul tries to help us understand God’s role, and ours, in restoring our broken relationship with Him and with one another. In verse 18 & 19 he writes: *“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: **19** that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them.”*

The Bible says Adam and Eve broke the perfect relationship that God created with us, and in our human nature all of us are separated from God...which means that sin affects all areas of our being, including who we are and what we do.

It doesn’t matter how good we are, how generous we are, how smart we are, how rich or successful or influential, or whether or how often we go to church...we still fall short of being able to restore that relationship ourselves.

So Ron, is there any hope for reconciliation?

The answer is yes! From the first book of Genesis to the last book of Revelation, the Bible makes it repeatedly apparent that God seeks to reconcile His people to Himself and that He’s provided a way to do so. But it’s not something we can do by ourselves.

As I mentioned earlier, this is a two-way street, and there are at least five steps on that path.

Step 1: Someone has to make the first move.

Although we caused our separation from God, verse 18 in today’s passage clearly states that our opportunity to come back together with God is initiated by God. *“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ...”*

In Romans 5:8 it’s underscored that this happened “while we were still sinners.”

Step 2: The second required step toward reconciliation is forgiveness.

This is an act of grace, and even though we don’t deserve it, God forgives us. It’s Jesus who took on all the sins of mankind, or as verse 19 says, *“this is done in Christ, and as a result God doesn’t count our sins against us.”* (2 Cor 5:19)

We’re told to forgive others as we’ve been forgiven. But although reconciliation cannot happen without forgiveness, forgiveness does not always lead to the restoration of a broken relationship. Forgiveness can be one-sided... But the one-way street to reconciliation ends there.

Step 3: The third step on the path to reconciliation is confession.

We're talking here about the wrongdoer admitting they did something wrong. If you can't get past this step, it's a roadblock to the remaining steps toward reconciliation.

And for some reason most of us are wired to find it hard to say we messed up...even when we (and everyone else) know we have.

Pastor Andy Stanley says, "Only genuine confession leads to genuine change. If you were to look at all the passages of Scripture in the Bible about confession, get this, most of them have people going to confess to other people, not to God. In fact, there's almost no teaching in the Scripture about confessing our sins to God."

Which leads to step 4: Repentance.

Repentance is an old fashioned word that means more than just being sorry. It literally means "to turn around," a change of mind and heart and conduct...a decision to act differently in the future.

This is one of those areas where talk is cheap. My father and my Uncle Leo had a falling out that lasted their entire later life. One time they unintentionally ended up at the same New Year's Eve party.

My dad refused to talk to my uncle, but I said, "C'mon Dad, you gotta wish him a Happy New Year."

So he went over and said "Happy New Year. But just for one year!"

That fell short of genuine repentance. Repentance means changing direction and committing to never doing it again...to behave differently from this point on. Spiritually, it means recognizing that we have to turn away from evil and turn toward the light.

Sometimes, as we sang earlier, you have to boldly declare "Stand back spirit of darkness! Get out! Get out of this dwelling place!"

Sometimes, even if all these steps have been taken, some hurts are just too horrendous, which makes the Rwanda example of reconciliation so poignant.

We were able to spend time with my good friend Laurent Mbanda, and his wife Chantal. I could do a whole sermon just on Mbanda's life: he was a Rwandan refugee who became a street kid, was eventually rescued by a missionary. Mbanda served as Compassion International's Director for all of Africa until he returned to Rwanda to devote his life to the post-Genocide reconciliation.

He and Chantal adopted more than fifty orphans, and had a second house specially built for them. In all these endeavors, Mbanda is living out what Paul called "the ministry of reconciliation." And Paul says, "[God] has committed to us this same message of reconciliation." (2 Cor 5:19)

Since returning to Rwanda, Mbanda was elected Bishop of the Anglican diocese bordering the Congo, one of the poorest regions. Mbanda also serves on the Board of the International Justice Mission, and was at one time considered for Rwanda's Ambassador to the United Nations. But he pursued a different kind of ambassadorship, which Paul refers to in verse 20: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us."

Mbanda eagerly hosted us in Rwanda, and I took advantage of the many days we had together to

delve into how the amazing reconciliation, (which he admits is still incomplete) could take place in the wake of the horrors of 1994. He described the steps I've already outlined. But he attributes it first to Jesus Christ, recognizing that unless and until men are first reconciled with God, complete restoration with one another is not fully possible.

He also cites the solid commitment and really creative action by the country's leaders. One of their first hurdles was "How can justice be served in a reasonable time when there are so many guilty parties?"

Then, in 2003, Rwandan President Paul Kagame shocked the world when he decided to make the first move.

He released from prison tens of thousands of genocide perpetrators who had confessed to their crimes. With an enormous backlog of court cases, Kagame opted to resurrect a traditional Rwandan method of handling community injustices through village tribunal courts.

Upwards of 1.9 million genocide perpetrators went through 12,000 similar community courts in which they admitted guilt to their neighbors. Many were forgiven and allowed to re-integrate into society. Sometimes this was after prison time, community work, or other retribution for their crimes.

Since that time, Rwanda has been living out a great national experiment of reconciliation. The government, together with countless religious and community organizations, has sought to knit back together this country of nine million people.

For example, every Rwandan is required to stay in their neighborhood the fourth Saturday morning of every month to participate in community activity... sort of a mandatory church work day! For four hours they clean up their neighborhoods, parks and roads, help fix each others' houses, and then they eat together. No wonder we never saw a single piece of litter throughout the country! More importantly, neighbors have been working side-by-side and gotten to know and trust each other for 21 years, and it has made a huge contribution to peace and restoration.

That's what happened with Honore and Jean. Honore visited Jean in prison. He said, "Because I loved him very much, I wanted to forgive him."

Honore made the first move. Before a neighborhood tribunal Jean publicly confessed his part in the murder of Honore's cousins, and he was forgiven and released from prison. Since then Jean has helped rebuild Honore's farm and home that he helped destroy. They are both a new creation. The old is gone, and the new has come.

This hasn't been a perfect process, but Rwanda is healing. It's taken a long time. For some people it may never happen. But relationships are being restored. And where there has been true reconciliation...well, Paul wrote what would happen: 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old is gone. The new has come."

Can you see that each of the steps toward reconciliation was taken?

- Someone made the first move.

- Wrongdoing was openly confessed.

- The victims forgave the perpetrators.

- Genuine repentance occurred...promising and demonstrating a change of heart and behavior.

-Justice was served. The wrongdoers were required to make restitution, perform community service, and sometimes serve time in prison.

My friend Bishop Mbanda says that for Rwanda and its people this has been more a spiritual journey than a political or judicial one. He says "It could not have happened without God's first reconciling us to Him...through Jesus." Which is exactly what Paul was saying in his letter to the Corinthians:

And so I ask you:

- Can you be an ambassador of reconciliation, first committed to reconciling with God, who already made the first move?
- Have you had a quarrel or disagreement?
- If you've been hurt or wronged, are you open to move beyond forgiveness to reconciliation?
- Is a ministry of reconciliation what Jesus had in mind when he told us to love our enemies?

As with the Rwandans, remember that reconciliation isn't always possible and often can take a long time.

If you're like me it's tough to imagine how to get over serious

wrongs. But if the offender is genuinely repentant, I encourage you to at least be open to the possibility of reconciliation.

I'd like to end by telling you about Jovia Kamatanese. Jovia was a Compassion kid who lost most of her family in the genocide. Like Michelle and Raf who have addressed our congregation, Jovia was one of the few kids who received a college education through Compassion's Leadership Development Program. She went on for her Master's and is now a Program Coordinator with Compassion Rwanda.

We had lunch with her and I asked if there was anything she wanted to ask one of the International Directors. She replied: "After I graduated I lost contact with my sponsors. They were elderly and I don't even know if they're still alive. Is there any way you can re-connect me with them so they can see that I am paying it forward and now sponsor a Compassion kid myself."

Well, we were able to make that happen, and shortly thereafter we were copied on Jovia's first email to her sponsors. Let me read just a portion:

Dear Sponsors,

I cannot withhold the joy I have writing this email. After 8 years I just feel tears of joy rolling into my face getting this GOLDEN chance to convey my greetings to you.

I am grateful to God who has kept both of us alive till this time. PRAISE THE LIVING GOD MY FRIEND!

PRAISE THE LORD SO MANY TIMES.

May the Lord hug you for me.

I pray that God keeps us in His salvation which will enable us to meet together in heaven after our good life on earth. I know one time it will be possible dear sponsors.

I am glad to give back what I was given and am trying to exemplify Christian servanthood to those I lead.

Once again thank you so much and may the Lord richly bless you.

Jovia

This was not a reconciliation, but it shows the joy that can come from a restored relationship, from reconnecting.

This was the kind of joy Joseph felt when he reconciled with his brothers after all those years.

This was the kind of joy the father had when his prodigal son returned with true repentance in his heart.

And this is the kind of joy God has when we reconcile with Him...we become new creations. The old has gone. The new is come.

It's the joy He feels when we extend the ministry of reconciliation to others. So give it some thought: If Rwandans can do so after the genocide of 1994, many of us should be able to as well. Amen? Amen.

Please Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com