

## “Christ the Reconciler” – June 9, 2024

### 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

*18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:18-20. NRSVUE)*

During my backpacking trips in Turkey a long time ago, I often traveled by bus, often taking around 10 hours to reach a new destination. One time, I journeyed from Ephesus to Pamukkale (meaning Cotton Palace in Turkish), famous for its stunning landscape of thermal pools. The scene was a breathtaking, otherworldly beauty, with sky-blue waters flowing down over thick layers of white limestone. As I stepped into the pools, I found the water pleasantly warm. It is well known that Pamukkale’s warm, mineral-rich waters are not only visually appealing but are also therapeutic.

Around these springs, there once stood three important cities: Hierapolis (now often called Hierapolis-Pamukkale<sup>1</sup>), Laodicea, and Colossae. In the Book of Revelation, Jesus rebuked the Laodicean church for its idolatry of wealth, metaphorically describing it as lukewarm in its faith—neither hot nor cold—drawing on its geographical characteristics. Due to the bus schedule, I couldn’t visit Colossae and had to choose an alternative destination.

So, today, I am going to talk about Paul’s letter to a place I have longed to visit—Colossae. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul mentions Hierapolis and Laodicea as neighboring cities of Colossae. Paul requested that his letters to the believers in Colossae and Laodicea be circulated to one another, ensuring that all the neighboring Christian communities could read them. (Col. 4)<sup>2</sup>

Since there were false teachings about Christ in those areas, Paul’s letter to the Colossians was like an antidote against false teachings. Paul wished for the believers in Colossae and the neighboring cities to be firmly rooted and grown up in Christ, strengthened in the faith, and overflowing with thankfulness.

Let me read Paul’s hymnic confession again:

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<sup>1</sup> Hierapolis is often mentioned in reference to the ancient ruins, while Pamukkale is famed for its thermal pools.

<sup>2</sup> The question of authorship remains a topic of debate among scholars.

“Christ is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

Paraphrasing Paul's confession, it might be read in this way:

- We are the body of Christ, and each one of us is a part of it.
- Jesus is the first to be raised from death, so that he would be above all others.
- God was pleased to have all the fullness of God (or all the divine essence) dwell in Christ.
- God was pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, to God by the blood of Christ on the cross.

Believing that Christ is the embodiment of the invisible God, who dwells in both human and cosmic domains, Paul encouraged the Colossian believers to understand how important it is for God to be reconciled with all creation, the church, and everyone through Jesus Christ. While encountering many people who were hostile to him, Paul acted as an ambassador for Christ, the reconciler. Paul also encouraged his companions in faith to do the same.

Reconciliation is not always easy. I still remember I had to wrestle with Paul when I read Colossians a long time ago. I appreciate most of Paul's exhortations, but I was not comfortable when Paul said, “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” (Col. 3:18) Or “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not with a slavery performed merely for looks, to please people, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.” (Col. 3:22) What? I seriously struggled with Paul's message when I was young.

We, United Methodists, believe that “the Bible does not fail in teaching the way of salvation,” but at the same time, as the late Gayle C. Felton suggested, we are invited to unwrap “the human packaging,” which means the historical and cultural layers, to uncover the Word of God that lies within. (Gayle Felton, a church historian who taught at Duke, was my mentor and advisor for a while.)

Rather than adopting the stance, “The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it!” the United Methodist Church formally teaches that “Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason” become the sources and criteria of theological authority. “Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason” are often called a “Wesleyan quadrilateral” that become the four pillars of our faith journey. Still, the UMC clarifies that the Bible is “the

wellspring of our faith,” occupying “primary authority” among those four pillars. We Methodists believe that these four taken together bring us to a mature and fulfilling understanding of the Christian faith.

Reconciliation is the heart of the Gospel, and in Paul’s eyes it brings a new life and new creation. God has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation. And it is the heart of ministry. Unlike forgiveness, which is possible only on one side, reconciliation is “an ongoing commitment on both sides to a changed and ever-changing relationship.” Reconciliation is always mutual and the final fruit of forgiveness.

After the recent General Conference, we, the United Methodist Church, removed discriminatory language and bans concerning ministry by, with, and for LGBTQ individuals from the Book of Discipline—language that was added in the 1972 General Conference. Nondiscriminatory policies are now an official stance of the UMC. I recognize the presence of disagreements and anxiety. If you have any questions about it, please let me know, although I may not have all the answers.

Now is exactly the time to step back and adopt the mindset of Christ. In his letters, Paul often responded to conflicts by continually encouraging the earliest Christian siblings to draw closer, not only to each other but also to God. Sometimes we may need to say, “We just disagree!” without hurting one another. From time to time, we need to put on the mind of Christ together, rather than casting blame. Dealing with various conflicts, Paul consistently exhorted the early Christian community (and you and me) to embrace one another with open, loving, and listening hearts.

When I joined the one-year online Academy for Spiritual Formation led by Upper Room in 2021, one of the themes was “Meeting God in Our Reconciling.” Ray Buckley, who was of Lakota/Tlingit/Scots descents, was one of the teachers. One of the stories from Ray that lingers with me was about the dream catcher. He said his grandmother taught him Christian faith with Native American (especially Lakota) wisdom. She taught him that everybody is a relative. Everybody is a sacred being. Everybody’s “human-being-ness” is holy and sacred because it is created and given by God. God’s grace is deeply embedded in every human being and every creature. Ray showed us a dream catcher, which is sometimes called a “sacred hoop.”



The dream catcher symbolizes the connection of all life. We are all the knots interconnected inside the hoop. According to Ray and his grandmother, God is strong like the hoop. Ray said, “The hoop is so strong, so you cannot push and pull it out of the shape of the circle. Likewise, you cannot push God out of shape. You can’t pull out God, either. We are tightly connected and surrounded by the strength of God. God's love, grace, and power are strong. Unbroken and unbreakable.”

According to Ray’s grandmother and Lakota tradition, nothing can block or destroy our relationships with God, with fellow human beings, and with other creatures. All of God’s creatures are sacred, because God made them. We are all interrelated, and we are all God-bearers. Today’s reading reminds us that we are blessed and called to be reconciled to God through Christ. As we dwell within the strong, unbreakable circle, we are also called to reconcile with others and ourselves. Whatever future God has for the UMC, we can be assured of one thing: Christ is the Lord. Christ is the Lord of the past, present, and future. So, what have we to fear?

Let us pray:

Loving God, you have reconciled us in Christ Jesus  
and have given us the ministry of reconciliation.

We pray for all those from whom we are estranged.

Bring healing to strained or broken relationships.

Forgive us for the times we have wronged others,  
whether by ignorance, neglect, or intention.

Grant us the courage and the grace to seek their forgiveness  
and opportunity to make amends.

Where others have wronged us,  
grant us a gracious spirit,

that we might forgive

even as we have been forgiven in Jesus Christ. Amen.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Prayers for Peace and Justice (Reformed Church in America)