

Message: “Peacemaking and Reconciliation”

Richard was distressed after some young people stole from his store. When asked to participate in mediation with one of the young people involved, Richard wasn't sure. This wasn't the first time he experienced theft, and he was frustrated. After learning more about mediation, Richard saw the benefit and agreed to meet.

The mediators started by encouraging the young person, Chris, to explain to Richard what led him to steal from his store. Chris said the kids he was hanging around with were a big influence on him. Chris also felt guilty asking his parents for things and so he resorted to stealing. As Richard listened to Chris, he saw a bit of himself in the young man.

So, Richard “shared his own experiences of making poor choices in the past, the consequences of those choices, and the impact on loved ones. Rather than expressing anger, Richard used his own story to illustrate the importance of making better decisions.

This led to a healthy dialogue in which Chris saw the importance of building healthy relationships and taking responsibility for his actions.

In a positive turn, Richard offered to mentor Chris.”¹ Richard plans to work with Chris to help him set goals and build the tools he needs to identify who does and doesn't have a positive impact on his life.

Chris plans to stay in touch with Richard. And, to rebuild trust with his Mom, and work on his own self-confidence. As the mediators closed the sessions, Chris let them know “this experience was more helpful than some of his therapy sessions” due to the dialogue created between he and Richard, those most involved in the incident.

Rather than a trial and punishment, Richard and Chris found peace with justice in a new way, a way which restores and gives life.

What a blessing they shared! This is a good example of restorative justice. All who were involved took part in peacemaking, seeking peace with justice. They lived into Jesus' way of life as he said, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God*” (Matthew 5:9, NRSVUE).

¹ <https://www.cys-la.org/post/a-store-manager-and-a-youth-find-common-ground>

How does restorative justice help make peace? Cintinela Youth Services, the ones who brought Richard and Chris together, see it this way: “Restorative justice provides communities with more equitable and community-based alternatives to address the harm caused by crime. Restorative justice practices empower those who’ve been harmed, hold responsible parties accountable and help repair the community.

Mediation brings the person who caused harm and the person who was harmed together, face-to-face, and allows humanity into our response to crime and wrongdoing. It gives the person who was harmed the opportunity to express, on their own terms, how the harm affected them. Restorative justice provides the opportunity for people to forgive, communities to heal and young people to turn their lives around.”²

Their results are impressive:

- Youth who participate are 166 times more likely to pay money back compared to those who get a court order.
- Those harmed report 98% satisfaction with the process.
- The recidivism rate – how often offenders repeat harm, is 1 in 10 compared to traditional penal responses which are 6 in 10.

Rev. Dr. Chris Kimmenez says, “I love restorative justice. It works, but it takes a lot of prayer to navigate our messiness and bring the truth that sets us free.”³

This narrative is a wonderful lesson for all of us. Not only were the lives of the two people restored, but their families were restored. The community was restored. And, indirectly, those who learn from this example – you and me, are also restored. When you hear about the results of restorative justice, it restores our faith and trust in God and humanity. It’s one small step toward healing. It’s based on a simple principle, reconciliation. This is Jesus’ ministry. Ours, too.

We are called to the ministry of reconciliation. Paul wrote about this in his letters to the church at Corinth. Corinth was the third largest city in the Roman world. It was diverse, mixing all sorts of people from all sorts of places with all sorts of beliefs. And the congregation reflected this diversity of people and beliefs. Sound familiar?

² *Ibid*

³ *Rev. Dr. Chris Kimmenez, #LOCKEDINSOLIDARITY*

Being called doesn't mean being easy, though. There was conflict in the church. Paul and the congregation were navigating through their differences. This meant working through internal strife and coping with the influence of outside sources. They managed to do so with time and care. But, you know, we can look at this narrative and ask a question.

What's the difference between conflict resolution and reconciliation? Conflict resolution and reconciliation are two distinct ways to address different aspects of disagreement. In conflict resolution, we face the material issues of the conflict. These issues often involve tangible things like money, property, our part in it or structures. To resolve these conflicts, we identify the specific problems that need to be solved and engage in negotiations with the people involved to find mutually acceptable solutions. For instance, if two parties are in conflict over money, they sit down to discuss and agree on a fair distribution that satisfies both sides.

In contrast, reconciliation focuses on restoring the relationship by addressing what lies at the heart of the conflict. This involves dealing with things like hurtful words and actions, gossip, avoidance and denial. Reconciliation goes beyond merely solving what you see on the surface. It dives into the personal, emotional and spiritual harm done.

As Paul taught, *“if a person is caught doing something wrong, you who are spiritual should restore [them] with a spirit of gentleness. Watch out for yourselves so you won't be tempted, too. Carry each other's burdens so you will fulfill the law of Christ”* (Galatians 6:1-3). The law of Christ is the principle of love, first and foremost.

The primary way relationships are reconciled is through confession and forgiveness. For example, if one person has wronged another, reconciliation involves the offending party admitting their wrongdoing and asking for forgiveness, while the offended party extends grace and forgiveness in return. This is deeply personal, a step toward healing.

The implications go beyond two people. Like the ripples a stone makes in a pond, forgiveness and reconciliation create ripples of restoration which affect families and communities. This is the love of God in action. And it begins with Jesus, the source of love and reconciliation.

Jesus reconciled us to God, renewing our covenant relationship with our Creator. Because of this God forgives us, completely and wholly. We are called to forgive in the same way.

Reconciliation involves mutual change, from the inside-out.

This “new creation” or “do over” or “fresh reordering” happens in our inner being, our spirit. Paul reminds us reconciliation begins with God. Jesus first reconciles God with us. This is the work of grace, which pardons and heals us. Once we’re whole, we’re able to reconcile with our family, friends and neighbors when wrongdoing happens.

Both conflict resolution and reconciliation are essential for healthy relationships, but they serve different purposes. Conflict resolution aims to solve specific problems, while reconciliation seeks to heal and restore relationships. I encourage you to be willing to engage in reconciliation for the sake of harmony and peace.

Ken Sande, author of *The Peacemaker*, says, “Christians are the most forgiven people in the world. So, we should be the most forgiving people in the world. However, as most of us know, it’s often difficult to forgive people completely and genuinely. We may find ourselves practicing ‘empty forgiveness,’ a form of forgiveness that is neither biblical or healing.”⁴

What would happen if God forgave you in the same way you may be forgiving people? To put it another way, how would you feel if you confessed a wrong to the Lord and God replied, “I forgive you, but I can’t be with you?” You probably wouldn’t feel forgiven.

Thankfully, God isn’t like that, and you don’t have to be, either.

You don’t have to do it on your own. Emanuel is with us. We can rely on Jesus to help us. When we forgive, we heal. Be a mediator both parties can trust and turn to. When we reconcile, our lives and the lives of those who are connected to us will be renewed and refreshed.

I’ll continue this next week in a message on koinonia, our life together. As I conclude, I echo Paul’s plea, “*Be reconciled to God*” (v20). Turn toward God with a genuine heart, knowing you, too, can be pardoned and healed.

Let us pray ...

⁴ Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker*, Baker Books, 2004, p.204

Galatians 6:1-5 (CEB)

Brothers and sisters, if a person is caught doing something wrong, you who are spiritual should restore someone like this with a spirit of gentleness. Watch out for yourselves so you won't be tempted too. Carry each other's burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are important when they aren't, they're fooling themselves. Each person should test their own work and be happy with doing a good job and not compare themselves with others. Each person will have to carry their own load.

2 Corinthians 5:16-20 (CEB)

So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him now. So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!

All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation.

So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!"