

# ***Reconciliation is the Center of Our Work***

2 Corinthians 5:17-20  
Sermon by Dan Schrock  
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*<sup>17</sup>So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! <sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup>that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. <sup>20</sup>So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (NRSV)*

Today is the final installment in our series on the three foundational beliefs of Anabaptist-Mennonites. They are:

1. Christ is the center of our faith.
2. Community is the center of our life.
3. Reconciliation is the center of our work.

What does it mean to say that reconciliation is the center of our work? That's what we want to poke around in today, and to begin our poking, I wish to lay out three ways in which reconciliation is the center of our work.

First, we strive for reconciliation with God. Actually, we ought to say that the other way around: God strives for reconciliation with us. Whatever reconciliation happens between us and God always comes at God's initiative. In biblical literature it is God who makes the first move toward us. We are the ones who messed up the relationship, who pushed God away. And so God in great mercy and passion and love pursues us, trying to do everything possible on God's side to reconcile with us. We can still push God away, but God keeps pursuing us. God is always ready for us to reconcile, no matter how horribly we pushed God away. When we strive for reconciliation with God, our striving merely responds to the moves God is already making toward us.

So we sin, and God comes after us. If you want a simple Anabaptist-Mennonite way of understanding sin, it's this: sin is whatever harms our relationships. If we do something to harm our relationship with God, then that's sin. If we do something to harm

our relationship with creation, then that too is sin. If we do something to harm our relationship with another person, or with other people, it's sin again. And finally, if we harm our relationship with our self—like for instance abusing our own bodies—that too might be understood as sin. Sin is the rupture of relationship.

The first part of our reconciling work is to be reconciled to God. I recently sat with a 61-year-old person who's been a faithful, church-going Christian for over 40 years. You could accurately say she was converted to the way of Christ a long time ago when she was a teenager. But as we talked it became very clear to both of us that the Holy Spirit was now inviting her, at age 61, to undergo a deeper conversion than she has ever known. It was as if the Spirit was holding a door open in front of her, inviting her to walk through it. The Spirit wasn't demanding this conversion, because the Spirit never demands conversions. But the Spirit was gently and persistently holding the door open to a deeper and more costly conversion. All the woman had to do was say yes. If we want to work as authentic ministers of God's reconciliation, then we ourselves have to be reconciled with God—and that's something of a life-long process. Don't think that just because you've been baptized that's good enough. At any time the Holy Spirit could nudge you to additional places of reconciliation with the Trinity. And these nudges could include costly, even painful changes on our part.

Second, we strive for reconciliation with each other. As one of many examples of person-to-person reconciliation, consider the persistent American problem of gun violence, particularly mass shootings in schools, malls, movie theatres, and churches. Most of these mass shootings are committed by white men. It is not typically women or children who pick up a gun and shoot groups of people in public spaces. Nor is it typically black men or Latino men or Asian men or Native American men. The main perpetrators are white men, which raises some questions.

- What dynamics in white male culture lead to so many mass shootings?
- Why do so many white men and boys produce and entertain themselves with violent video games?

- Why do white men manufacture, sell, and buy guns; attend gun shows; and advocate for unrestricted access to guns?
- And among members of Congress, why is it that white men are the ones leading the fight against gun control?<sup>1</sup>

After a mass shooting, people frequently blame mental illness. They claim it's mentally ill people who do these things. But a more credible explanation is that the violence of mass shootings is actually caused by anger, not mental illness. In a few cases the (largely white male) shooters may have some type of mental illness, but all of them, mentally ill or not, are angry. "Violence," one psychologist writes, "is a product of compromised anger management skills."<sup>2</sup> If this diagnosis has validity, then one of the crucial ways we Anabaptist-Mennonites can promote reconciliation between people is to teach anger management skills, especially to white men and boys.

In addition to teaching anger management skills, we can also find ways to defuse other people's anger. One night a Angie O'Gorman was sleeping alone in her upstairs bedroom when she was awakened by a man who kicked open her bedroom door and walked in. She tells what happened next.

"He was somewhat verbally abusive as he walked over to my bed. I could not find his eyes in the darkness but could see the outline of his form. As I lay there, feeling a fear and vulnerability I had never before experienced, several thoughts ran through my head—all in a matter of seconds. The first was the uselessness of screaming. The second was the fallacy of thinking safety depends on having a gun hidden under your pillow. Somehow I could not imagine this man standing patiently while I reached under my pillow for my gun. The third thought, I believe, saved my life. I realized with a certain clarity that either he and I made it through this situation safely—together—or we would both be damaged. Our safety was connected. If he raped me, I would be hurt both

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Childress and Harriet Childress, "White Men Have Much to Discuss about Mass Shootings," *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/white-men-have-much-to-discuss-about-mass-shootings/2013/03/29/7b001d02-97f3-11e2-814b-063623d80a60\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/white-men-have-much-to-discuss-about-mass-shootings/2013/03/29/7b001d02-97f3-11e2-814b-063623d80a60_story.html), accessed August 28, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Laura L. Hayes, "How to Stop Violence," *Slate*, April 9, 2014, [http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/medical\\_examiner/2014/04/anger\\_causes\\_violence\\_treat\\_it\\_rather\\_than\\_mental\\_illness\\_to\\_stop\\_mass\\_murder.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2014/04/anger_causes_violence_treat_it_rather_than_mental_illness_to_stop_mass_murder.html), accessed August 28, 2015.

physically and emotionally. If he raped me he would be hurt as well. If he went to prison, the damage would be greater. That thought disarmed *me*. It freed me from my own desire to lash out and at the same time from my own paralysis. It did not free me from feelings of fear but from fear's control over my ability to respond. I found myself acting out of a concern for both our safety which caused me to react with a certain firmness but with surprisingly little hostility in my voice.

“I asked him what time it was. He answered. That was a good sign. I commented that his watch and the clock on my night table had different times. His said 2:30, mine said 2:45. I had just set mine. I hoped his watch wasn't broken. When had he last set it? He answered. I answered. The time seemed endless. When the atmosphere began to calm a little I asked how he had gotten into the house. He'd broken through the glass in the back door. I told him that presented me with a problem as I did not have the money to buy new glass. He talked about some financial difficulties of his own. We talked until we were no longer strangers and I felt it was safe to ask him to leave. He didn't want to; said he had no place to go. Knowing I did not have the physical power to force him out I told him firmly but respectfully, as equal to equal, I would give him a clean set of sheets but he would have to make his own bed downstairs. He went downstairs and I sat up in bed, wide awake and shaking for the rest of the night. The next morning we ate breakfast together and he left.”<sup>3</sup>

I share this story by Angie O'Gorman not to suggest that you ought to do what she did if an intruder enters your home, or to suggest that even if you do what she did the results will be the same. Instead I share the story to inspire all of us to consider how we might be ministers of reconciliation, in particular to angry white men. James 1:19 puts it this way: “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.”

Third, we strive for reconciliation with our enemies. Again, loving our enemies has many facets worthy of our attention, but for now I simply want to point out that scholars who study peace say that nonviolent resistance is a sensible, credible strategy that

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 234.

generally produces better results than violence.<sup>4</sup> When it comes to social change, nonviolence works better than violence. So in addition to having biblical and theological reasons for using nonviolence, we also have practical reasons. Nonviolent approaches are one practical way of fostering love for enemies.

Menno Simons once said that “our weapons are not swords and spears, but patience, silence, and hope, and the Word of God.”<sup>5</sup> We in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition believe that one of the most distinctive teachings of Christianity, perhaps the most distinctive teaching, is Jesus’ encouragement to love our enemies. This belief, and the actions that flow from it, are one of the main things that binds Mennonites together. We are ambassadors of reconciliation.

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<sup>4</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, “Drop Your Weapons: When and Why Civil Resistance Works,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2014-06-16/drop-your-weapons>, accessed August 28, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Menno Simons, “Reply to False Accusations,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. J.C. Wenger (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1956), 555.