

Colossians 1:15-20

<sup>15</sup>Christ is the image of the unseen God and the firstborn of all creation, <sup>16</sup>for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth: everything visible and invisible, Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignities, Powers – all things were created through and for Christ. <sup>17</sup>Before anything was created, Christ existed, and all things hold together in him. <sup>18</sup>The church is the body; Christ is its head. Christ is the Beginning, the firstborn from the dead, and so he is first in every way. <sup>19</sup>God wanted all perfection to be found in Christ, <sup>20</sup>and all things to be reconciled to God through him – everything in heaven and everything on earth – was reconciled when Christ made peace by dying on the cross.

Luke 6:26-37

<sup>26</sup> Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. <sup>27</sup>As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. <sup>28</sup>When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me’— <sup>29</sup>for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) <sup>30</sup>Jesus then asked him, ‘What is your name?’ He said, ‘Legion’; for many demons had entered him. <sup>31</sup>They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

<sup>32</sup> Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. <sup>33</sup>Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

<sup>34</sup> When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. <sup>35</sup>Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. <sup>36</sup>Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. <sup>37</sup>Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned

This healing story of Jesus says that Jesus and the disciples arrived in to the country of the Gerasenes, traveling by boat, and as soon as they stepped onto dry land they were met by a man possessed by demons – he had torn away his clothes and he did not live in a home, but instead lived among the dead, in the cemetery of his town. When his demons ragged, those of the city would chain him up, presumably not knowing how else to keep him and themselves safe – in some ways, we have perhaps not advanced as far as we think.

This is one of many healing stories of Jesus, of Jesus encountering someone whose life experience has caused them to be separated from life in their community – either by illnesses, their profession, their martial status, or in this case – demons. From the standpoint of our scientific and material-based worldview, it is sometimes hard to know what to make of these healing encounters, especially when demons are involved. But what I think is interesting to notice in this particular story is not so much the pigs who ran into the lake, thought that is quite interesting and disturbing, but rather how Jesus’ healing encounter begins with this man – he begins by asking, “what is your name?” Jesus begins by naming the demons standing in-front of him – he begins by naming what it is he is meeting, what he is facing – he begins by exposing the demons through the process of giving it a name. This is how healing begins, this is how reconciliation begins, through the power of naming – the process of naming what it is we are facing.

Groups like AA who often meet in church basements like ours, they have long known this truth – that personal healing from addiction cannot happen as long as things are kept in the dark

– for change to happen, for someone to begin the process of personal reconciliation, there must first be a naming of the truth of what is happening – we must unmask and reveal the thing that wants to stay hidden – we must name the thing which holds power over us. This is the beginning of healing. Just as a doctor must begin with a diagnosis, they must figure out what is making one sick in order to know where treatment might begin. And so personal healing, personal reconciliation, it begins with naming.

But this is not only true with personal healing and reconciliation, it is also true on a systems level, on a societal level – that in order for change to happen, in order for reconciliation to occur, we must name what is at work – we must unmask the system which has power over us.

Palmer Becker, in trying to teach and summarize the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith, has said:

- 1) Jesus is the center of our faith.
- 2) Community is the center of our life.
- 3) Reconciliation is the center of our work.

Reconciliation, bringing all things into right relationship, working toward restoration, this is the center of our work. What I appreciate about this word *reconciliation* that we are focusing on over these past weeks, is that it is, I believe a ‘thick term’ – it encompasses both the personal and the corporate/societal. It is more than peace, more than personal salvation, more than forgiveness, more than social justice – it is all of these; it is both personal and systemic. We have talked about how the Hebrew concept of *shalom* encompasses considering right relationship with God, with

ourselves, with others, and with all of creation. *Shalom* is a thick term, as it covers pretty much everything. But *shalom* is not really a term that works well outside of church walls or church settings, and so I think *reconciliation* might be our best attempt at a word with meaning – with depth – a thick concept.<sup>1</sup>

And so, reconciliation, it begins with naming. It begins with naming the broken pieces of our own lives – those things which we are ashamed of, or feel guilty about – naming those things that are out of balance and bringing them into the light. And also with naming the broken pieces of our society, of bringing into the light that which wants to be hidden, of naming the realities of culture and societal systems that are out of line with what God has created them for. Of naming where things are not in right relationship with God.

The church has often done only one or the other – some churches (which we have come to call ‘Evangelical’ or ‘Conservative’) naming only the personal sins that are not in right relationship with God; other groups of churches (which we call ‘Liberal’ or ‘Progressive’) focusing on naming only societal areas that are not in right relationship with God. This divide has grown so strong that in my life time many congregations like ours never speak of a need for personal repentance and refer to Evangelism as the “E-word”. And there are Evangelical leaders who have said that if your pastor uses the term “social justice” then you should run the other way. This has left us with what Miroslav Volf has called, “thin faith.”<sup>2</sup> A faith that doesn’t tell

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Sharon Harper uses this concept of a “thick term” in her book *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything can be made right again*.

<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf is a Protestant theologian and professor at Yale University. This concept of ‘thin faith’ comes from his work, “A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good”

the whole story of God, a faith that does not tell a large enough picture of who God is and what God calls us to. And this is where it is helpful to think in terms of ‘reconciliation’ is so helpful – it encompasses the personal and the systemic.

Let me give you an example of naming the personal and the societal. When I write my article for the Corpus Christi newsletter – our homeless day shelter here in Boise – when I write my article for the front of the newsletter, I do not go for the traditional “success story” of someone who is now on their feet because of our work. From a fundraising perspective, that is perhaps what I should do, trying to show that we are worthy of donations because we are changing lives. But these are not the stories we tell, not just because they are hard to come by (which they are), but because every time we read a success story we are reinforced to believe that our system works – every story of someone who moves from homeless to a house and a job reinforces the belief that those who want it bad enough can change their lives; it reinforces the belief that people who are perpetually homeless are people who chose to be homeless; it reinforces the belief that if people just try hard enough, our great system of capitalism will afford them that opportunity.

And while there are of course people who are able to overcome poverty and homelessness and addiction because of the beautiful spirit of God thriving within them, their success stories do not diminish the bright beautiful spirit of God thriving in those who are never able to overcome homelessness or addiction or find relief from their mental illness. A few people finding their way to a new life does not mean that we do not need to name the places where our system is unjust and needs to be brought back into right relationship to work for everyone, not

just for the middle-class and the wealthy. A success story does not mean that we should continue to serve and worship the golden calves of consumption and capitalism and continue to increase the great income divide between the rich and poor.

But we cannot work toward reconciliation without first naming some of those places that have become out of line with what role they are intended to play in our lives and in our world.

Walter Wink and other theologians, using the language of the apostle Paul, call these societal dimensions “The Powers that Be.” Wink says that there are entities, institutions, and systems that are fallen, they have taken on a life of their own believing they are the thing that is to be served and preserved at all costs – that these “Powers” have become our gods in many ways, and they must be redeemed.

Hang in there with me here, as this concept of the Powers is vitally important, I think, but a bit complex to try and unpack in one part of a sermon (so much so, that it took me three version of sermons to pick a best direction for explaining the Powers).

These Powers have been created by God, says Wink, created to help give us order and structure – created to give us a better chance and justice and at peace – but these systems are no longer serving their original purpose, they are no longer in-line with the purposes of our Creator. And so these systems must be redeemed – they must be called back to their original purpose – this process of redemption, says Wink, begins with naming – it begins with unmasking the powers. Just like in our personal lives, we must first bring these into the light for transformation to happen, for reconciliation to happen.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Wink has written a trilogy on the Powers; this trilogy is summarized in his 1998 work *The Powers That Be*.

Let me give some examples to hopefully help layout this concept.

<u>Creation/Intent</u>	<u>Master – imbalance</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Material resources</li><li>• Human difference</li><li>• Male &amp; Female</li><li>• Leadership</li><li>• Government</li><li>• Institutions</li><li>• Love &amp; appreciation for land</li><li>• Method for exchange of goods and services</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consumerism</li><li>• Racism/ethnocent.</li><li>• Sexism</li><li>• Authoritarianism</li><li>• Nationalism/militarism</li><li>• Institutionalism</li><li>• Nationalism</li><li>• Greed/exploitation/capitalism/communism</li></ul>

CHART: we see on the left-hand side the Power that exists for some purpose, some benefit of the creation. And on the right-hand side is what we might call it when it is out of balance, when it is fallen and seeking for us to serve it, to worship it – when it seeks us to serve it, rather than it serving us. You will notice most of these on the right end with ‘ism.’<sup>4</sup>

- **Material resources** God has filled the earth with resources for beauty, for delight, and for our survival. We have exploited these and have defined ourselves by the amount of these resources we have. We name this as consumerism or materialism.
- **Human difference** God has created us with difference. Different language, different ideas, different skin color, hair color/type, different eye color, different body type, different ideas and ways of thinking, etc. Presumably because the glory and fullness of

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<sup>4</sup> This chart is adapted from the course, *Peacemaking and Justice* at Hesston College, taught by Marion Bontrager. I have adapted this after taking course with Dr. Stephen Ray on race and the church at SCUPE in Chicago.

God is so vast and diverse, because the earth needs variety and beauty and different people working in harmony together for the glory of God to be known and the earth to be properly tended to – because this is needed for the thriving of our world. But we have assigned value and hierarchy to these differences, believing some people groups which we have called “races” and “ethnicities” to be superior in some way. We have divided ourselves according to such groups. We call this ‘racism’ or ‘ethnocentrism’

- **Male & Female** God has created us male and female - we must have both to procreate and survive – also to represent the fullness of God. But we too have given value to these differences, we have said that males are physically stronger and so are superior. We call this ‘sexism.’
- **Leadership** We need leaders in helping us live together – structure our lives and not have complete chaos. When this is out of balance and we worship that leader, when we give them too much power, we call it “authoritarianism.”
- **Government** We need systems for organizing ourselves as people to lessen violence and chaos, to give us a higher chance at justice and peace. But when we worship and protect that form or type of government at all costs, when we believe there can only be one form of government for all the world, we call this “nationalism” which we defend with “militarism.”
- **Institutions** We build structures around things that we believe need to be preserved, such structures allow things to carry on – for things to be passed down through the generations. But when we begin serving the institution, when we start to believe we cannot live without these institutions, that they are too large to fail - when we

do whatever necessary to keep the institution alive. This is institutionalism – this is when the institution becomes our god rather than serving God (be it a school, a denomination, a bank, a government).

- **Love & appreciation for land**      God seems to have knit into us a love for the land where we live and dwell – this seems vital to our survival, for we of course take more care of that which we love and which we need. Those most engaged in caring for creation usually have a deep sense of place, a love for land. But this becomes out of balance when we begin killing others to protect that land, when we believe it belongs to us and only us – when we will do whatever necessary to keep others off our land.

And so on and so on. Hopefully this gives you enough of a picture of what Wink and others are talking about when they speak of “The Powers” that are created by God and fallen.

For things to be reconciled, for right relationship to be restored, we must begin by naming these Powers – naming these ‘isms’ that have become distorted – these things that seek our allegiance and want us to serve them. These Powers want to remain hidden and they want us to believe that we cannot exist without them. Humanity has lived much of our existence without banks and interest, but the power of consumerism and capitalism wants us to believe that we could not survive without a banking system. Last summer I took a class on race and the church and Dr. Stephen Ray said that we cannot ask what race Jesus was, because there was no concept of race during the time of Jesus. “What?!” I thought, how can there have ever been a time without the concept of race? I could not picture a world where race was not a category for making meaning

in the world. This is what “The Powers” seek. It is only after naming and unmasking them that we can begin transformation.

Some examples where naming has brought “The Powers” into the light and helped lead to a step toward reconciliation and redemption:

Many believe it was images from the Freedom Rides and the Bloody Sunday march to Selma that helped change the tide of the civil rights movement. In these terrible and violent images the Power of Racism revealed itself, it unmasked itself for the pure hatred it is. Before these images many living outside of the south were able to say, “separate but equal is okay”, or “that things probably aren’t really that bad for Black Americans living in the south.” The news coverage and images of peaceful people being violently beaten alerted us to the deeper realities that were so far outside of being in right relationship with others.

And in these past couple of years, if you are like me, it was not until the events in Ferguson, Missouri after the death of Michael Brown that my eyes were opened to the numbers of deaths of unarmed Black citizens who are killed at the hands of our nations police – ways that the Power of racism is still at work. In my reality police are to be fully trusted, but the Black Lives Matter movement has alerted and named for us this form of racism that is still at work. It helped to name this for those of us who had never seen it before.

And this past July at the Mennonite convention in Orlando I heard multiple people say from the

stage that the Mennonite Church needs to be involved in helping to reform the prison system in our country. This is something that only recently the American Church has started to address, I believe that it was not until Michelle Alexander named our American prison system “The New Jim Crow” that we started paying attention. All those who believed they would have marched alongside King in the civil rights movement began to engage in discussions, reform, and lobbying efforts after Alexander called this Power, “The New Jim Crow”, a system which will bring 1 out of every 3 black men to prison at some point in their lives.

And finally, the Power of Nationalism which has wrapped itself into American Christianity. A 2016 survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors found that 53% of pastors believed that their congregations sometimes seems to love America more than God. Over half of American Protestant pastors believing their own congregation - congregations which they help lead and perhaps even founded – seem to love their country more than God. This is nationalism out of balance. This is a view of nation which has worked its way to becoming our God.<sup>5</sup> Many people in the pews probably cannot distinguish their love of God from their love of country, because they have been intertwined in so many ways. This is the Power of Nationalism, seeking to survive and grow, seeking to be worshipped, and seeking to stay hidden. It must be named.

And so, as a people of God’s Cosmic Reconciliation, as a people of a thick faith, seeking personal and systemic wholeness – let us attend to our work of reconciliation. Let us be a people

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<sup>5</sup> A summary of this survey can be found in Christianity Today, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2016/july/patriotic-worship-is-coming-to-church-near-you.html>

empowered to name where things are not as they should be – where we have placed institutions and nation and self-preservation before the God of the Universe. May God empower us to this first step of reconciliation, that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.

Amen.

### **Sending Blessing**

*And now as you go from this place, may the God of Reconciliation go with you –*

*Alerting us to the places we blindly serve the Powers,*

*Empowering us to call these by name,*

*And sustaining us with the knowledge that they can be redeemed –*

*That healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.*

*Go in peace. Amen.*