

I. Intro.: Hi, my name is Neil Amstutz & they sometimes let me preach at this church

A. Seriously, it's good to be back at Waterford, as I've been gone 4 of the last 7 Sundays

1. Last week, as the worship singing was beginning 8:00, I settled into it, raised my heart in praise to God, & I thought "I've missed being at church!"
2. One of the places I've been is the high desert country in northern New Mexico, which happens to be served by Amtrak. So I decided to see more of the big Western countryside coming home by train
3. Along the way I had some meals in the dining car,



and unless you have your own group of four, you'll be eating with travelers you haven't yet met

- a) And as it goes on public transportation when you meet strangers, they often ask where you're from and what you do ...
- b) Answering with "pastor of a Mennonite church" usually brings responses of intrigue, confusion or just plain blank looks.

B. So in that dining car on the train, I got a particular kind of response from some friendly and curious people I met:

1. This is what I heard:
 - a) *"Oh, I met some Mennonites in the Texas panhandle. The women all wear plain dresses and the men are famous for helping people after floods and disasters."* (Other times when traveling, I've heard something like:)
 - b) *"There are some Mennonites not far from us in North Carolina. They're good farmers and they bring their produce into town to sell, but they kind of keep to themselves out in the country."*

2. Most everyone, if they didn't live in certain parts of Kansas, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania or Virginia, was surprised I'm a Mennonite, implying that I don't “look like a Mennonite”.

a) Their perception, of course, is of simple people who often drive buggies and set themselves apart from the rest of the world by how they dress and how they live.



[PPT cons Mennos]

b) How many of you have had experiences like that meeting strangers?
How many of you grew up being that kind of Mennonite or Amish?

C. Now some may chuckle about such definitions of what Mennonite means, but there's a historical reason for it.

1. Some of us have ancestors who, 1 generation ago or 5 generations ago, were counseled by their preachers to follow the words of Jesus in John 17, when he described his disciples as being both “in the world” but at the same time “not of the world”

a) Over the centuries in Europe and here in North America, Mennonites have taken very seriously the ethical instructions to be “in the world but not of the world”

b) This has often been the basis for Mennonite doctrines of nonconformity in terms of how we dress, the technology we use, our transportation, and how much we engage with the public and with government

2. As author John Paul Lederach notes in his book Reconcile, sometimes we Mennonites have taken that motto so seriously that

we've placed all our emphasis on the "not of the world" portion of it.

- a) This isn't true of all Mennonites, nor do I mean that if you didn't grow up in that tradition, you aren't a real Mennonite Christian
- b) But friends, this is where the subject of reconciliation as followers of Jesus comes into play
- c) This morning I'm going to challenge us about what that word "reconciliation" entails, and about whether we may be called to be NOT "not of the world" ...

II. Review 3 points of JPL's which I made in Sept. 2 message from Jacob & Esau story

A. Reconciliation is simultaneously 3 things:

1. A destination: a place we long to arrive at. Who doesn't want to settle into the comfortable place of reconciliation, and put conflict behind them?
2. An encounter: In reconciliation we encounter ourselves, we encounter others & we encounter God.
 - a) This especially happens when we act on Cindy's sermon last week to practice careful listening to ourselves, to others & to God
 - b) It's hard to truly encounter yourself, other people or God, if you're not actively and deeply listening
3. A journey: It's something we'll be working on our whole lives, where the real growth happens along the way. The growth happens as we move toward our enemy, we learn from him or her, and we're changed in the process

B. Many evangelical Xians emphasize the first one especially, (3rd on screen) that reconciliation is a destination

1. They focus on results & outcomes -- sin forgiven, righteousness established, heaven arrived at, no more alienation ...
2. In many cases in the evangelical world, reconciliation is more of a future reality than anything we aspire to see in our earthly lives
3. But if reconciliation is indeed a journey and not just a destination, then it blows apart many of the separations that we Christians often declare:
 - a) It blows apart the separation of the gospel of JC and peacemaking ... Between mercy and justice ...
 - b) Between spiritual life and the daily life we live on earth

4. This means that the work of reconciliation is not merely an outgrowth or a side benefit of getting your soul right with God.
5. We believe peace & reconciliation is not some auxiliary emphasis alongside the Gospel, not just an optional focus for some Christians.

III. Our theme today is that **"Reconciliation IS the Gospel"**

A. I'll try to keep it simple.

1. Right now, I'm not using the narrow word "salvation" which has often come to mean little more than caring about souls while leaving the body and mind to rot in a hellish existence on earth
2. God's mission IS reconciliation
 - a) 4 years ago in our Year of the Bible, our framework for understanding the Bible was Heilsgeschichte (God's holy history) ... God's purpose in that holy history is to establish and keep establishing shalom
 - b) God longs to break down barriers, to heal what is wounded, to recreate and put back together what is broken or fragmented
 - (1) God used Jesus in a unique way 2K years ago to overcome our sin, to defeat evil and demonstrate a new humanity
 - (2) God called a covenant people to be His special instrument for accomplishing this purpose –
 - (a) 1st it was the patriarchs and matriarchs and the Jewish people as a whole;
 - (b) then God opened it up more broadly for Christ's church to be that model holy community ... even up to today
3. This message that ties reconciliation & the Gospel together is summarized in several Bible texts:
 - a) In Colossians 1, it tells us that all things hold together in Christ, through whom and for whom they were created. ALL THINGS! It also says God was pleased to reconcile all things to himself through Christ
 - b) In Ephesians 2, we hear of the work of Christ Jesus to break down the dividing wall of hostility and to create in himself one new humanity that is reconciled with each other and with God
 - c) Moreover, what we hear from 2 Cor. 5 is not only that God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself ... but that God has given US the ministry of reconciliation. This reconciling mission in the world happens not only by God's hand, but also through us!
4. This cosmic vision of reconciliation for a new humanity was God's mission in the first place with the world

- a) But it happened most fully through incarnation ... through the word becoming flesh, through God not just "playing it safe".
- b) Instead a holy God entered into the very messiness of our human condition

B. This brings me back to my earlier comments about Mennonites being more "not of the world", by pulling back into isolation and focusing on boundaries of purity

1. There's a description I've sometimes heard people use to describe someone who's encased in a spiritual cocoon and out of touch with the world around:

- a) Of such a person they say, "*He's so heavenly minded that he's of no earthly good!*"
- b) Is it possible that in our history as Mennonites and other sectarian kinds of Christians, that we are so "not of this world", that the world hardly knows that we even exist? Are you so heavenly minded that you're of no earthly good?
- c) Jesus also said that we should be the light of the world ... a city set on a hill.

2. How ironic that the Jesus whom we adore modeled atonement and holiness for us, not by some new version of Noah and the ark ... but by messy incarnation!

- a) As a Jew, Jesus defiled himself by seeking out marginal people ... he went to those who were poor and oppressed ... He touched lepers, he didn't just isolate himself with other like-minded saints
- b) While we can rightly say that Jesus (as Son of God and Messiah) was not of the world [*He even told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world*], yet he deeply identified with the people and places of this world, and he fully lived within it!

3. Let us disabuse ourselves of idealistic notions that reconciliation is some pleasant tool that comfortable people like us can use to try to return to our status quo, anytime a personal relationship turns unpleasant for us.

- a) Reconciliation work means entering into the messiness of the world, risking tough relationships, and seeking out people who are different, rather than running away from them!
- b) But what does a new humanity mean when we live in a county where blacks and whites basically live in separate communities, and the social circles of our white, black and Latino populations hardly mix at all?
- c) In Lederach's book, he makes this provocative statement about the

realities of following on Christ's reconciling mission:

It is not possible to pursue reconciliation except through people who risk the journey to relate across the social divides. In this way, they help make present the reconciling love of God.

Lederach, p. 129

IV. I said it was provocative! Like me, you may be squirming a little inside to read this. If you're part of our middle-class white majority, you may want to protest ...

A. "That's not fair. I don't personally know any black or brown people who live near me. I can go all day and never have opportunity for a real conversation with a black or brown person."

1. I recognize that can be true. But that reality is not accidental. It didn't "just happen" out of the blue.

a) For decades the city of Goshen was a "sundown town" with unofficial expectations that people of color get out of town before sundown. The patterns of who lives here and who doesn't were put in place decades ago.

b) We choose our friends, our neighborhoods, our churches, our jobs usually for our own comfort level. We have the freedom & privilege to choose lives that isolate ourselves from personal interaction with people who are "different"

2. The provocative nature of that statement from Lederach may lead some of us to a different objection, one that sounds like this:

B. "I do have some black and Latino neighbors and friends, but I get along fine with them ..."

1. You may say, *"I don't have enemies. This 'ministry of reconciliation' doesn't apply to me because I'm not feeling oppressed. My personal relationships are pretty good now."*

2. *Moreover, you might add, the people I might get upset with are already Christians, so I don't need to introduce them to Christ. They wouldn't take kindly to my telling them, 'I think you need to be reconciled to God!'"*

3. I get that. Sometimes I too have considered this "reconciliation thing" to be only for other people who have to deal with war, injustice and mean people every day.

a) My response would be that your view of reconciliation is too narrow. God's not interested only in individual salvation.

b) God's not talking only about reconciliation in personal relationships. The need for reconciliation in the world God sees is much bigger than that.

E.g.

(1) God longs to reconcile warring nations, not just feuding individuals ... to reconcile plants, animals & the whole interconnected cosmos, not just people

(2) God doesn't just seek justice for particular women & vulnerable people who've been abused & harassed ... God seeks to reconcile the unhealthy perspectives of manhood & womanhood that have led to such violence

(3) There are sinful patterns of racial hatred and discrimination entrenched in our economic and political systems. These are of just as much concern to God as whether I personally say or do something racist

4. In other words, if reconciliation feels like just some distant concept for you, then I invite you to reconsider the title of that classic JB Phillips book from the 1960's – Your God is too small!

V. Conclusion

A. Today I've invited you to consider if God is calling you to step back from “not of this world” in order to see if you are “in the world” enough to even make God's reconciling mission visible.

1. God did not place us here just for us to punch our ticket to heaven, & maybe bring some other passengers along while we're “fleeing the sinking ship.”

2. God wants us to be part of God's reconciling mission here on earth – to draw people toward heaven at the same time that, by the Spirit's power, we create a little more heaven on earth.

3. How many of you remember what's in the last line of our congregational mission statement? (*Hint: it's on bulletin cover*) Why do we call out each other's gifts? ... “for the joyful work of God's reconciling mission”

4. Doing the work of reconciliation is part of our congregational mission because really it's God's most fundamental mission

B. So if reconciliation is a journey calling for us to risk relating across social divides, how might that happen? I'll close with a few practical ways for how you might participate in God's reconciling mission. You could ...

1. Volunteer with GIHN @ St. Marks, as some of you will this next week. Get to know homeless persons as actors in their own lives, & not just passive charity recipients Gordon Bontrager can tell you

more about this

2. Contact the Safety Networks through Assembly Mennonite Church for making yourself available to vulnerable local immigrants. Helping with transportation and longer term supportive relationships are among those options. Info. is on our HOPE table in foyer.
3. Be a tutor or mentor @ Prairie View Elementary School. Contact Len Harms or Marge Gingerich from our church.
4. Volunteer at Center for Healing & Hope, assisting the medically underserved in our community. Mandy Schmidt is on their board and could put you in touch with the right people.
5. Be a host family for an international student through Bethany Christian Schools, or for a young adult from another country in the IVEP program of Mennonite Central Committee.
6. Without going through an agency at all, if you have neighbors who look or talk differently from you, take the courage to talk with them, get to know them, and prove that those external differences don't have to be such a barrier.

C. Brothers & sisters, being "in the world" is a good & necessary thing, especially when we join in God's reconciling mission. Let us strive to be "not of this world" but not so far "not of the world" that they can't even see Jesus through us