

“God’s Accountants”  
2 Corinthians 5:16-19  
18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

September 22, 2024  
Westminster, Greenville  
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I need to give you fair warning as I begin.  
Today’s sermon...could be a bit MESSY.

I know, I know.  
That’s not the news you were hoping to hear.  
After all, Presbyterians like things done decently and in order.

But this sermon may end up in a place that’s not decent and in order. It could turn out to be a very messy sermon.

Why?

For starters, I’m going to begin by swimming in waters I’ve never swum in before in a sermon. Talking about a subject that some of you have degrees in, and years of experience in, and that I have absolutely no expertise in...

What topic is that?  
Accounting.

You see, a couple weeks ago, I was doing our monthly bank reconciliation at home, and I got stuck. The problem began in the early summer, when we called our credit card company to let them know about a fraudulent charge, and they reimbursed us for it. But then they made a mistake, and reimbursed us for three MORE charges.

Now those additional charges were correct.

So we called them back, and told them they needed to reverse those reversals. But they didn’t do it.

We called them back again to remind them that they needed to do it. And they reversed the wrong thing!

It took them a couple of months and a few more phone calls to clean up the mess, and I spent the summer trying to calculate the difference every couple of weeks between what the credit card company said that we owed, and what I knew we truly owed.

But by the end of the summer, I finally got everything on our credit card bill to reconcile.

I was relieved...until I discovered a \$200 difference between what I thought we should have in the bank, and what the bank said we had in our bank.

Now I know...what's the big deal?  
\$200 difference?  
Just go with what the bank says.

But this is the kind of discrepancy that drives my Type A personality absolutely nuts. When it comes to finances, I don't want anything...to be MESSY.

I don't want MYSTERY numbers.  
Or missing numbers.  
I want assets and liabilities to balance out.

I think it's safe to say that in the world of accounting, no one wants numbers that cannot be explained, or financial statements that are not reconciled with bank statements.

Let me hit the pause button.  
All you finance people in the pews, how am I doing so far?  
Maybe not an A+, but at least a passing grade?  
Just tell me at the door on your way out of the sanctuary today.

But I decided to venture into these waters because, in our sermon series on Paul, our topic this morning is a word from the world of finance and accounting and bookkeeping.

That word is reconciliation.

You remember what Paul wrote:

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to [God’s] self through Christ...”

In the world of accounting, this means making things match—we can account for all the numbers. But in the world of theology, when it comes to our lives, our relationships with neighbors and loved ones, and our relationship with God, none of us can truly keep track of the numbers.

We cannot account for the balance.

We will never know our debt, we will never know how much we owe, we will never know how much grace we’ve been given, we will never know how much we’ve been forgiven.

According to Paul, THAT’S what reconciliation is about.

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Now as I said at the beginning, this may be a messy sermon. And not just because of how I began the sermon. But because of the topic I chose for the sermon.

What’s the topic?

Reconciliation.

Paul writes:

“...in Christ God was reconciling the world to [God’s] self, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

How many of you have ever tried, in your life, to reconcile with someone before?

Perhaps they were someone who disappointed you.  
Or deeply wounded you.  
Sometimes, the process of reconciliation—  
while it’s not easy, goes well.

More times than not, however—it gets a little bit...messy.

Many of you are familiar with the writer Anne Lamott.

I recall reading Lamott’s description of what happened with her mother. Lamott writes that she had a complicated relationship with her mother. It was painful in a whole lot of places, and the resentment festered for years.

Then, before they could work out their differences, her mom died.

“I prayed for my heart to soften,” Lamott writes, “to forgive her, and love her for what she did give me—life, great values, a lot of tennis lessons, and the best she could do.

“Unfortunately,” Lamott goes on, “the best she could do was terrible.”

Her mother was cremated, and Lamott says that when she received her mother's ashes, she intended to put them on the bookshelf next to the boxes that contained the remains of the family pets.

But OLD WOUNDS got the better of her.  
And Lamott decided, in a moment of spite,  
to put her mom's cremains in the back of a closet.

Lamott says that she left her mom there, in that closet, for the better part of two years, where, as she put it, mom could "stew in her own ashes."<sup>1</sup>

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Do you see the problem?

Paul writes beautiful words today:  
Old life, new life.  
We're given the ministry of reconciliation.

But when we try to work those words out in the real world, the beauty of those words is often hard to see.

If you have a family member who has hurt you,  
or a friend who was close to you,  
or a co-worker who tried to undermine you,  
or a church that turned its back on you...  
coming to terms with what's happened is hard,  
and reaching reconciliation is never easy.

Why?

Because unlike forgiveness, reconciliation is a two-way street.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, New York: Riverhead Books, a member of Penguin Group (USA), 2005.

Look, when it comes to forgiveness, anyone in this room—with the help of God—can forgive someone else. Forgiveness does not require that the person who wronged you admit that they were wrong. It does not require that they repent.

What it does require is your willingness to let go of that wrong.

To not let it consume you.

To not let it take up space in your head and your heart for free.

You and I may never forget what happened, but we can  
—over time—forgive what happened.

And let it go...

Reconciliation is a bit different.

It requires forgiveness.

But it also requires the other person to participate.

So what happens when the other person doesn't want to participate?

Or doesn't see the need to repent?

Do you remember the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was formed in South Africa in the second half of the 1990s?

In 1997, 60 Minutes ran a segment on that Commission.

They interviewed Dirk Coetzee (Koot-see-ah), who led a South African police hit squad, under the Apartheid regime, that killed antiapartheid activists.

According to the rules of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, if a member of the previous South African regime had committed atrocities against Black South Africans, but applied for amnesty and told the truth about those atrocities to the Commission, they would not be convicted for their crimes.

In the 60 minutes interview, Coetzee (Koot-see-ah) recounted some of the horrors that he and other secret police perpetrated. He described them—as just another day on the job.

And he expressed no remorse to 60 Minutes, just as he shared no remorse with the Commission.

And, good to its word, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission granted Coetzee amnesty.

Now Desmond Tutu was the chair of the commission.

And there's a moment in the 60 Minutes segment when Tutu is also interviewed, and he's asked:

“Don't you think that granting a murderer amnesty, which is a form of forgiveness, even if he doesn't repent—don't you think this is carrying Christianity a bit too far?”

To which Tutu responded:

“Christianity has always been a religion that takes risks. We are saying people who committed horrendous acts, demonic acts, monstrous acts are not monsters...we say that there is a possibility of changing.”<sup>2</sup>

[CHANGE]

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<sup>2</sup> Found on YouTube on the “60 Minutes Archive: Desmond Tutu and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.”

What do you think?

Was Desmond Tutu taking Christianity a bit too far?

I told you this sermon was going to get a little messy...

Actually, it's a fascinating theological question that 60 Minutes asked Tutu, because it wasn't just a question about Tutu or Christianity.

Perhaps unintended, it was also a question about God.

Can the grace of God, the reconciliation that God offers in Christ—can it ever go too far?

Let me get at it like this.

Some of you may recall me mentioning in a sermon, a few weeks ago, the Italian painter Michelangelo de Caravaggio. I referenced him because of the copy of one of his paintings that we have here at Westminster in the Friendship Court.

Caravaggio was a giant in Italian art.

He was one of the fathers of the Baroque period.

As the biographer, Andrew Graham-Dixon, puts it:

“He was a thunderstroke. There is art before Caravaggio and art after Caravaggio...the whole of Rembrandt's career is a response to...seeing Caravaggio's art.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Russ Ramsey, in his book, *Rembrandt Is In the Wind: Learning to Love Art Through the Eyes of Faith*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2022.

In his paintings, one of the themes that Caravaggio was drawn to was the theme of old life/new life.

“...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

He returned to this theme again and again.

The print that we have in the Friendship Court, for example...who is it of?

The Apostle Paul.

It's the scene in which Paul encounters the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

Old life...new life.

I may regret doing this...it's probably a terrible idea.

But I'm going to give you permission, if you'd like, to use your iPhone in this sermon right now. If you wish, pull out your phone, and google Caravaggio and Doubting Thomas. My bet is that you'll recognize the painting, in which the risen Christ is guiding the finger of the disciple Thomas into the wound in Christ's side.

If you don't do it now, do it after worship. Look it up.  
It's THAT kind of moment that captivated Caravaggio.

The transformation of Thomas's doubts to faith.  
Old life. New life.

My favorite Caravaggio painting is *The Calling of St. Matthew*.

It's a scene of Jesus pointing at Matthew, calling the tax-collector, the scoundrel, Matthew, to follow him. But this painting is marvelously ambiguous. Because it could also be a scene of Jesus calling the scoundrel, Caravaggio, to follow him...

Scoundrel?

Yes.

You see, while Caravaggio created beautiful art, his behavior when he wasn't painting was ANYTHING but beautiful.

Another writer puts it like this:

“Over the course of his life, [Caravaggio] got into many fights, which included several brushes with the law and stretches in jail. In fact, much of what we know about him apart from his art comes from court documents, of which there are many. He is [someone] known not only for his art but also for his criminal record.”<sup>4</sup>

Those crimes included not only brawls and brushes with the law, but murder. On at least two occasions, Caravaggio was suspected or accused of killing someone else.

In other words, he never did what Desmond Tutu believed to be possible.

He never changed.

And eventually, his careless and cruel ways of living caught up with him.

He was on the run, found on a beach, wounded and sick.  
He died at 38 years of age.

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<sup>4</sup> Ramsey, *Rembrandt Is In the Wind*.

Now here's my question:

Do you think that when Caravaggio succumbed to his wounds and his illness, do you think God said, "Ah—Caravaggio—what a mistake I made in creating that guy! I'm just going to write that one—off the books!"??

Or do you think, at Caravaggio's death, God said to him something like this:

"Caravaggio, I have loved you since the foundation of the world. Not because of your paintings, but because you've always been my precious child. I claimed you and I called you and in the risen Christ, I have redeemed you.

"Come. Welcome home. You are now reconciled to me."

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What do you think?

Is there such a thing as God's grace going "a bit too far"?

It's not just this sermon that dove into some messy waters today.

It's the grace of God.

A grace that promises to dive into those waters as well.

So, the next time you walk by that painting in the Friendship Court, consider the kind of grace that LOVES to dive into the most revolting and disgusting waters you can imagine.

The kind of grace that reconciles—not just good people, not just faithful people, but as Paul puts it today—reconciles the ENTIRE WORLD to God's self.

What is that grace like?

You know what it's like.

It's the kind of grace that has loved YOU since the foundation of the world.

It's the kind of grace that reconciles even the most unrepentant parts of OUR lives.

It's the kind of grace that comes to our most messy places, and promises to heal them, to make them whole.

And it's the kind of grace that you and I get to share with God's world when we leave worship today.

Amen.