



"No, please!" said Jacob. "If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably.

Genesis 33:10

In God's word we read story after story of reconciliation breaking through in unexpected places. One of the most striking stories of reconciliation I have found is recounted in Genesis 33. There we read that Jacob, after agonizing and avoiding conflict, prepares to meet Esau, the brother he betrayed.

While years have passed and the circumstances have changed, Jacob is still the younger brother fearful about meeting his twin face to face for the first time since stealing his birthright. But it is here, in the cloud of Jacob's worry, the light of grace breaks through. Esau runs—not walks, *runs*—to greet his brother, sweeping him up in his embrace. Astounded by this grace, Jacob declares, "to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably."

These are powerful words coming from a man who has just been face to face with God Himself. In just the previous chapter, we read that Jacob wrestled with God, likely in anticipation of this impending meeting. And after his wrestling with God, Jacob names the place where he struggled, Peniel, because, he says, "I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

Jacob wrestles with God face to face. Then, Jacob recognizes God in the face of his brother. I don't know that the greatest commandment Jesus gave us comes through any more clearly than right here.

The face of God is most visible in our reconciliation, in the embrace of those whom we have wronged, in committing to love those who have harmed us when we surrender to God's purposes and the power of the Holy Spirit to work in our lives.

In the past year I have seen the reconciling power of God's grace in the faces of pastors marching on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. In tweets and posts on white privilege, and those who have committed to doing more than tweeting and posting about it. In the words and advocacy of those who desire to end the cradle to prison pipeline in so many of our nation's black communities. I have seen God most clearly in the places where the light of God's love has broken through via the mouths and hands and feet of God's people.

In reconciliation, we see the very face of God—the same face that is now enthroned in heaven, the same face that writhed in agony on the cross, and the same face that Mary looked into on that first Christmas morning. May the power of the Holy Spirit work in and through

us in such miraculous ways that when others feel the warmth of our embrace, they recognize the very face of God.

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God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8

For the past two years, my husband and I have been living and working in Romania with a small non-profit organization that does youth development work. As part of our job, we lead weekly meetings of a club of wild 12-year-olds, who gather every Wednesday night in a run-down building to play games, tell stories, and plan service-learning projects in our community. They also gather every Wednesday to fight and swear at each other, sticking out feet to trip passing club members and threatening to hit each other with broken chairs. We're working on it.

We have been meeting with this group of kids for almost a year, and although we still have to send kids home periodically, they're making progress, sometimes in the unlikeliest of ways. For instance, in October we hosted a Halloween party at the building with our club. Despite the name-calling, and amid the ridiculous games of wrapping each other in toilet paper to make mummies and bobbing for apples, a beautiful, raw moment happened.

Our club had just finished carrying its most ostracized member around the outside of the building, laughing uproariously as they galloped along, carrying in their arms this boy wrapped in toilet paper, scraps of it dragging in the dirt behind him. As their final challenge, they then had to sing and dance to an entire song while standing on only one leg. They chose a popular love ballad from the radio and turned the volume up high, and as the strains of the music pulsed through the air, the club came together and grabbed each other's arms, swaying back and forth, singing along at the top of their lungs. For three long minutes, we bobbed back and forth, holding each other up, toilet paper still trailing off our shoes, grinning. United. No swearing or pushing. No one worried about standing next to the ostracized kids. They were reconciled, at peace.

I can't speak to John Legend's theology, but what I do know is that on that night, for those three minutes, his words were perfect for our club:

*'Cause all of me
Loves all of you
All your curves and all your edges
All your perfect imperfections
Give your all to me
I'll give my all to you
You're my end and my beginning
Even when I lose I'm winning*

*'Cause I give you all of me
And you give me all of you.*

Isn't that reconciliation? It's not that our rough edges disappear, or that we suddenly fix our imperfections. It's that in spite of them, in the midst of them, we can stand arm-in-arm, leaning on each other for balance, giving our all and receiving all of each other in return. We can practice being fully present, fully *with* one another, imperfections and droopy toilet paper and all. This is about finding peace and hope and hospitality for ostracized kids in the unlikeliest of places, seeing them welcomed and brought into the family of God. This is about *all* of us receiving the remarkable grace that wraps us up into itself, from the God who is the End and the Beginning and who loves us – in our entirety – and brings us to know himself.

Kelly Organ lives and works in rural Romania with an organization called *Fundatia Noi Orizonturi*, which does community development and experiential education work with youth. A graduate of Calvin College and a former Congregational Justice Mobilizer with the Office of Social Justice, Kelly now serves as a partner missionary with Christian Reformed World Missions alongside her husband, Jack.



“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.”

1 Corinthians 12:12-14

A mother and her adult son were worshipping at a church. They were a hesitant about attending worship because they had been asked to leave a previous congregation. The son’s behaviors were not always in line with what people expected. The son, who has Autism Spectrum Disorder, was having a difficult morning at their new congregation, too, and cried out loudly a number of times. Eventually, the pastor stopped preaching and asked the mother and son if they were okay. Then he prayed for them, and the son found peace; worship continued.

The pastor behaved kindly, but how would congregation members react? Would they tell the mother she needed to keep better control of her son? Would they suggest they find another church? Praise God, the members of this congregation gathered around mother and son after the worship service and reassured them kindly. “You are welcome here.” “Don’t let this keep you from returning.”

This welcome was so different from the way they were treated in previous congregations that they chose to stay. In fact, recently, the son was baptized, and the mother made a public profession of faith. After more than 30 years, they had found a church home.

Through the apostle Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 12, God paints a vision for his people as one body, together in Christ. No one excludes another. (The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!”) No one self-excludes. (Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.) In fact, the members that seem to be weaker are indispensable to the healthy functioning of the body (1 Cor. 12:22).

Surely, being asked to leave a previous congregation was painful for this mother and son. But, according to Paul, the church that asked them to leave hurt itself even more than it hurt this man and his mother. Churches that exclude people with disabilities have lost indispensable parts.

I pray that someday people in churches will so embrace God’s vision for biblical community that this vision will be part of the culture of each congregation. Each congregation will clearly portray the guests assembled at the great banquet of Luke 14:15-24. People with and

without disabilities will be able to get in and take part; and those with disabilities will join in numbers even greater than their proportion in the larger society. Each congregation will meet or exceed the guidelines and standards of accessibility and participation required by law in the rest of society. They will accept full responsibility for doing their part in meeting the spiritual and physical needs of the people and families with disabilities in their communities.

Biblical visions do not happen automatically in churches. Instead we default to practices that feel most comfortable for the majority. Many people must step outside their comfort zone before the church can become a community in which everybody belongs and everybody serves.

What is your church doing to move toward that biblical vision? What can you do help your church take one step further on that journey?

Prayer

Reconciling God, thank you that this mother and son found a church to call "home." Open my eyes to the stumbling blocks that my church places before people who want to participate, and give me the courage to be an agent of your reconciliation to help my church remove those stumbling blocks. Keep us moving toward your vision of true, loving, welcoming community. In the name of Jesus who broke down the walls that divide us, Amen.

This devotional has been abridged and modified from the CLC Network blog, [Making Us Whole](#), posted Oct. 9, 2014.

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“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view.... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

2 Corinthians 5:16, 18 (NRSV)

I sat in a classroom of the school in Mishkeegogamang First Nation, well aware of the line of water forming on my lower eyelids. For much of Canadian history, indigenous and non-indigenous peoples have regarded one another from a human point of view. It is a sad story, full of pain, harm, and hatred. But that was not the reason behind my tears that day.

As I sat in the classroom, surrounded by the chief and council, friends from this community, and my fellow directors and camp staff of MishAdventures (a summer youth program that is heading into its ninth summer), my tears were the overflow of a heart full of joy. I was watching unfold what can happen when, through Christ, a change occurs in our “way of knowing” one another.

To work toward reconciliation, or a change of relationship between us, I could no longer regard indigenous people from a human point of view. I had to let go of the socially conditioned worldview I inherited from my upbringing. As we sat together, sharing stories, food, pictures, and laughter at the journey of our relationship over the past eight years, the tears of joy crept in as certainly as reconciliation broke in.

There is still much healing to be done, but as one of the councillors of Mishkeegogamang reminded us on his way out of the gathering, “Friends help one another.” Our camp team was reminded that from now on we must discern everything in the light of God bringing the new creation out of the old. Because in Christ something new *has* happened, through us something new *must now* happen. We look forward to what this friendship will continue to teach us about reconciliation in other areas of our lives.

Prayer

Creator, renew our minds and hearts with your movement of reconciliation. Give us eyes to see the world the way you do, and no longer from a human point of view. Move us toward the joy of experiencing daily what it means to behave like people who live in a whole new world, who partner with you to bring the new creation out of the old.

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“Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them; and those who are ill-treated, since you also are in the body.” ~Hebrew 13:3 (RSV)

The gray sky hung low over the prison yard as we traipsed along in the wake of the chaplain. As we made our way across the concrete, inmates showed us varying degrees of welcome: an indifferent stare, a reluctant wave, a smile and a shouted word of greeting. We were guests of the Muskegon (Mich.) Correctional Facility, there to learn about the Prison Fellowship program implemented at the facility.

MCF was well known for the efforts that its publically and unapologetically Christian warden had been implementing, especially its faith dorm. Reserved for inmates seeking to grow in their faith in a community of similarly committed peers, the dorm is one of only a handful of its kind in the United States. Inmates who are within two to four years of release are given the opportunity to serve the remainder of their sentences in an environment of intentional spiritual formation and mutual accountability. This handful of programs across the country has reported dramatically reduced recidivism rates among its graduates and improved morale among its participants. We made our way into the chapel of the faith dorm just as the choir was filing onstage. As I settled into my seat in the small auditorium, the inmate next to me leaned over and said, “You’re going to like this.”

“Like what?” I asked him, but before he could answer, the sound of the choir swelled from the stage, billowing into every corner of the room, thundering upon inmates and visitors alike. I stared unblinkingly at the mass of men singing without reserve, clad in gray jumpsuits. I noticed my new friend next to me glance my way with a smile. Eventually the choir stopped and the chapel service continued with a theology workshop, a homily, and communal prayer time. All of it was meaningful; all of it was a gift. But no moment more so than those precious brief minutes when all of us in that room were transported out of the faith dorm, out of MCF, and given a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven by a choir of felons. And what of my friend? Well, his name was John, and he was getting out in less than a year. His plan? To finish the seminary training he had started in the faith dorm at MCF and return as a chaplain to help other men the way that he had been helped. If that isn’t reconciliation, I don’t know what is.

Prayer *Liberating God, give us courage to seek you in unfamiliar places. Give us eyes to see you and hearts to join you in your work of liberation and reconciliation.*

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“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

Luke 2:14

All my favorite people are broken

Believe me

My heart should know . . .

This forthright acknowledgement of human frailty is the refrain of a beautiful 2011 song from the folk group Over the Rhine.

The song—titled simply “[All My Favorite People](#)”—is not meant specifically for the Christmas season (although the band does have several lovely Christmas recordings). Even so, its lyrics linger fittingly in my mind these Advent days.

Broken is an important word to dwell on while pondering how Christ entered humanity so he could serve as an atoning sacrifice for us—God’s conflicted, hurting, and estranged children. In order to understand Christ’s reconciling work, we have to recognize that we are all deeply broken, so very much in need of a Savior.

In this season of reflective expectation, I am also pondering the phrase “favorite people” as I revisit the Incarnation story. For most of us, a large part of Advent anticipation is eagerly awaiting celebrations with friends and family—our favorite broken people. Every year, I am grateful to lean into the narrative of hope together with those I love, with meals and songs and lights. I know that these people are gifts from God.

At the same time, though, I know this narrative extends far beyond the men, women, and children whom I know well and hold dear. Nor can it be celebrated as a narrative meant only for the people whom the *world* holds dear. Worldly favor falls crookedly, curved by injustice and fear. Most of our economic and political systems favor the strong over the weak—the wealthy over the poor and the healthy over the sick. These are haunting indicators of humanity’s woundedness.

All of our favorite people and places and nations and institutions are broken. This our hearts should know. The good news—the news made known through the miraculous reality of the Incarnation—is this: all of God’s broken people are favored.

Mary was a young woman living in obscurity and poverty; yet she found great favor with God, and so carried his Son. Shepherds, in Jesus’ time, had little stature; yet they were the first to hear the news of Christ’s birth from the angels’ holy mouths. And when these angels famously proclaimed that a child—a Messiah—had been born in the tiny, no-name town of

Bethlehem, they pointed to this gift as evidence of the Lord's generous favor.

From the family down the church pew to the stranger in another country to the friend across the table—all of us are beloved and worthy, broken and chosen. And we have unique gifts to offer as we aspire to unite the fractured pieces in our time, until God's ultimate reconciliation comes to pass.

This broken person is God's favored child.

If we let this refrain shape our interactions with others, I believe that even our imperfect efforts to promote mercy and encourage peace can become powerful testaments of the radical inclusivity of our Father's grace.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for showing your loving favor to us through the redeeming gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. We are broken, but through this gift we are being made whole. Help us to remember that all of your children are worthy and beloved. Equip us to show your mercy in this shattered world, so that your kingdom will grow in our hearts and be made visible through our efforts in service of you.

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“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Acts 20:35

How many of us have experienced this fact as we relate to our God and engage with others around us? Most often we give out of our abundance. For me the abundance flowed from the gifts of a steady income, health and accessibility to work, joy in intercultural relationships, and more. I recognized many of my lavish blessings from God as refugees became a significant part of my life in the past eight years.

Then the “blessing of giving” came to a halt. I was diagnosed with cancer. Six months of testing, surgery, appointments, and waiting followed. Would I have a future? Would I again have plans? Would I be able to attend hearings with my newcomer friends? How about watching them choose their first set of winter clothes or checkout apartments that were accessible and safe? Through this love for my neighbors, I wanted God to know how deeply I loved him. It was one of my offerings to him. My walk with the Lord had been so blessed by walking alongside newcomers. Relationships of mutual discovery were the highlights of my days.

Then another string of appointments unfolded and the treatment began. How I longed for it all to be a distant memory. The isolation of the journey was daunting and uncanny; tears became the bookends for my days. Did my suffering matter to anyone? When you are a “doer,” how does your life still have value when you are not able to act? When community energizes you, what do you do when you are not well enough to interact? Who was this new person I had become? My capacity to contribute meaningfully to anyone’s life felt so limited.

I came to God with empty hands. No longer could I give out of my blessings, my time, or any other extravagance he had so generously poured on me. I came to him with sorrow and disappointment, pleading for his grace and mercy on a bruised and broken body and spirit.

Slowly . . . painfully slowly . . . I began to see through the fog. God began showing me that he loved me “not less and not more”— whatever I offered him was **his gift to me in the first place!** It was his grace alone that allowed me to accompany others on their life journeys. It was not about my willingness, my interests, my stuff to share. He had privileged me with the gift of these tasks! And he had not abandoned me in this difficult time! Instead, he reminded me that he is the author and provider of all that we offer to him. As the song resonates through me, “I need you, oh I need you . . . every hour I need you.”

Prayer

Dear Father, help us to remember that our emptiness becomes full only through your grace

and love. Thank you, Father, for your work of reconciliation in us. May we be faithful pointers to you. Come, Lord Jesus, come! Amen.

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“God . . . reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”

2 Corinthians 5:18

The promise of Advent is greater than the saccharine consumerism and sanitized images of baby Jesus in the manger. I know, this already sounds like some self-righteous rail against a decadent culture. I participate in that culture as much as any suburban dad with two cars, a mortgage, and a penchant for skis and canoes and drums and . . . The point is, I need to be reminded that Jesus breaks into history to reconcile a broken creation. Amid addictions to apathy and affluence I tend to forget that reconciliation is a dramatic, searing, and continuing journey. The poet puts it well:

Like a stone on the surface of a still river, driving the ripples on forever, redemption rips through the surface of time in the cry of a tiny babe.

Bruce Cockburn “Cry of a Tiny Babe”
from *Nothing but a Burning Light*, 1991

Jesus rips into our reality and patiently and insistently redeems creation and all of us. The joy and responsibility of being followers of that baby-turned-rabbi-turned-Savior is that we allow ourselves to be changed by him. The testimony of indigenous people in North America demonstrates this.

Apologies have been a semi-common trend among churches recently. The Christian Reformed Church in North America offered an expression of reconciliation at a Truth and Reconciliation Commission event, and apologies were part of the remembrances of the centenary of the CRC’s indigenous mission in Rehoboth, New Mexico. OK, good we’re done, it’s in the past, let’s move on—right? Wrong. The past, too, has its ripples.

Just recently I heard an indigenous church leader say that repentance and reconciliation are more than an expression of sorrow or a change in policies. They require our *turning away from the systemic evil that we **all** participated in*. And that evil persists in ongoing cycles of brokenness: in deep poverty in indigenous communities; in missing, trafficked, and murdered indigenous women; and in cycles of family breakdown and addiction related to historic trauma.

Reconciliation doesn’t stop with an event or a noble-sounding declaration. *It requires a turning* that includes our hearing of the extraordinary courage and grace of indigenous people who are walking a path of forgiveness. And it requires following their lead to bear witness and do justice against systemic evil. We must allow ourselves to be changed by that not-so-tame baby Jesus.

Our Creator's ripping into history is grace and forgiveness that ripples among oppressed and broken people—let's follow their lead and be part of the healing ripples in an active ministry of reconciliation. Jesus' rip, followed by ripples in us, is the reconciliation promise of Advent.

Prayer

Untame God, break anew into our lives with your unrestrained love and grace and teach us to live both gently and recklessly as your reconciled, reconciling people.

***Mike Hogeterp** is director of the Centre for Public Dialogue. Mike manages the research and advocacy components of the centre's work, and is also deeply invested in the ecumenical community. Mike is married to Michelle, with three children. In his downtime he drums, canoes, gardens, cooks, and listens to music.*



“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

Did you hear the sad news about the funeral on Oct. 27, 2014? On that day when Rev. Chris Penaranda would have celebrated his 46th birthday, he was being buried instead. He was killed during a head-on collision while riding his motorcycle after finishing his work for the day with World Renew’s disaster response team in the Panay region of the Philippines. His death was a shocking loss not only to his wife and four children ages 2 to 11 but also to his co-workers in World Renew.

“A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,” Chris was a pastor with the CRC in the Philippines whom God used to help many people who suffered great losses from Typhoon Haiyan. As a community organizer in Palaguian, he helped bridge conflicts between Catholic and evangelical Christians. He counseled and disciplined people who were troubled in their souls, eventually leading some to find new life in Christ.

Chris lived the ministry of reconciliation to which 2 Corinthians 5 calls us. Christ was born to reconcile us to God. Chris Penaranda was born to share that good news in the Philippines. In a context where a typhoon broke the harmonious relationship of people with God’s creation, Chris spoke words of healing. He was part of a team of disaster response workers who helped people rebuild their houses to be typhoon resistant, who helped to restore livelihoods with new fishing boats or through business loans, and who helped to restore people’s hope in God.

In his work as pastor of one of the local churches, Chris showed that the body of Christ on a global level cares about reconciling even in disaster. Many people were so touched by the demonstration of compassion that they started to worship God as part of the church. Jover Tingzon was one community member who received a new house. With his young daughter clinging to his neck, he narrated how his wife died of sickness and he lost his house in the typhoon. His piercing, tear-filled eyes were unforgettable as he shared these words: “I love you, madam, and all who God sent to help me.”

Chris Penaranda’s life and death reminds us that we exist each day by God’s grace in order to share God’s message of reconciliation. The choice ours whether or not we shine Christ’s

incarnational reconciling presence and carry on the work of faithful ambassadors like Chris Penaranda. So how will you do that this Christmas season? How will you in the new year give of your time, your talents, and your tithes? Even amid overwhelming loss and grief in the sea of humanity, how can you share with God's people the deep and everlasting love of the long-awaited Messiah who came to be with us? It is Christ's love that overcomes the destruction of a typhoon by giving new homes, and it is Christ's power that overcomes the death of his saints, like Chris, by giving eternal life. Praise and Glory to God!

Prayer

Life-giving God, enable us to live your message of reconciliation.

Ida Kaastra-Mutoigo is the co-director of World Renew.



“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Matthew 5:4

My dad died suddenly when I was a teenager, prompting an influx of sympathy cards from well-meaning people in my life. As anyone who has experienced loss knows, some of the Bible's promises sound a lot like platitudes for someone who is in grief.

“Blessed are those who mourn” is one of those phrases. This line made me feel like I was under the microscope, as if the litmus test for “faithful mourning” was finding the silver lining in all my grief. A “real” Christian would wipe their eyes and say, “Well, the blessing is that he is in a better place.”

The hope of heaven did not feel like a blessing to me in those months – I was overcome by the sadness that there is a difference between heaven and earth. I had eyes to see, for the first time, that mourning, crying, and pain were not God's plan for the world.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, who grieved the sudden loss of a son, says it this way: “The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God’s new day, who ache with all their being for the day’s coming, and who break out into tears when confronted with its absence. . . . The mourners are aching visionaries. Jesus says: Be open to the wounds of the world. Mourn humanity’s mourning, weep over humanity’s weeping, be wounded by humanity’s wounds, be in agony over humanity’s agony. But do so in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming.”

This is a season of cheer. In fact, on Sunday we will light the candle of joy in our Advent journey toward the birth of Jesus. For many-- for Nicholas Wolterstorff, for the widow sitting in the pew behind you, for the immigrant facing deportation, for the kid whose dad’s parole was just denied, for the parents of Mike Brown, the children of Eric Garner, the classmates of Tamir Rice . . . for many faithful folks – lighting a candle of joy this Sunday will be difficult. Maybe forced. But it won't be fake.

Clarence Jordan said there are real mourners, and thus there are fake mourners. The fake ones say, ““Sure, the world’s in a mess, and I guess maybe I’m a bit guilty like everybody else, but what can I do about it?” What they’re really saying is that they are not concerned enough about themselves or the world to look for anything to do.”

Blessed are those who truly mourn, whose hearts truly break for the sadness of the world. Because they’re the ones who are most engaged. They’re the ones with a front-row seat to see redemption, reconciliation, hope breaking through. “You’d better watch out when a fellow gets that certain gleam in his eye and a certain set to his jaw. He’s getting ready to

'mourn.' And he'll be awfully hard to stop, because he will be receiving tremendous strength and power and encouragement from seeing his mourning become deeds."

May we truly mourn this Advent season, and may that mourning – through the power of the Holy Spirit – become deeds. Maybe it's with our sleeves rolled up and with our protest signs in hand that we will get to see a real glimpse of the joy that we have been promised.

This Sunday congregations around the U.S. will wear black to their worship services and light the candle of joy amid real, ongoing suffering. They'll wear black to symbolize the real grief of the past months, and they'll wear black to proclaim the truth that Black Lives Matter. [Will you join them](#), turning your mourning into deeds, and see what joy might come?

Rev. Kate Kooyman is a project developer for the Office of Social Justice. She is a graduate of Western Theological Seminary and hopes to empower the church to live into its call to be advocates for justice.



“Do not take revenge. . . . ‘I will repay,’ says the Lord.” ~Romans 12:19

Without a doubt the Old Testament overflows with payback; “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” was the order of the day (Deut. 19:21). However, the overarching story of the Old Testament points out the obvious: sinful humans can never fully pay back God or his image-bearers whom they offend. That’s why the history of redemption looked forward to the coming of a Messiah who would provide the payback with his own life.

And that’s exactly what Jesus did. His coming to earth, which we celebrate during this Advent season, was the beginning of a new order that completely eradicated the so-called reciprocity code (Matt. 5:38-42:39). This new order requires us to leave retribution to God if there’s hell to pay. Indeed, we are to be reconciled to God and to consider others in light of this new point of view (2 Cor. 5:14–17).

Reconciliation rings a bell of freedom that resounds more and more in our otherwise revengeful culture. Take the story of Christopher Bazar, which made news headlines recently. While intoxicated and high, Christopher shot and killed his best friend, Donald St. Laurent, and was subsequently sentenced to three years in prison for manslaughter.

Yet Donald’s parents did not seek payback for Christopher’s crime. Instead, they begged the court to show him mercy. When Christopher was incarcerated, they lobbied for his early release, and they promised to house him and give him a job at their family’s construction company. “I believe people deserve a second chance,” Donald’s father told the astonished parole board.

This incredible story reminds us that radical forgiveness in the face of even the most gruesome of crimes is possible only because Christ came into the world. Advent reminds us of the darkness of payback in which we’d be stuck without Jesus. And Advent helps us look forward to a new world in which redemption fully replaces the reciprocity code. The bitterness of payback always leaves a bad taste in our mouths. But what a joy it is to know that, because of Christ, we can experience true reconciliation with God and with each other, which tastes as sweet as honey from the comb.

Prayer *Thank you, Lord Jesus, for coming into the world to rescue us from the grip of payback. May this message penetrate our culture’s propensity for revenge and ring out with the freedom and joy that reconciliation in Christ brings. Amen.*

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“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

John 14:27

It was January and John was in the hospital—again. His cancer had progressed rapidly over the past year, and with his age and his medical treatment options limited he and his family knew that he didn’t have much more time. Months earlier John and his wife had chosen quality of life over quantity, knowing that God had been gracious in the 84 years John had already received.

And so he sat in a big, comfy easy chair in the palliative care unit of the hospital, holding court. He met everyone who came to see him (and there were many), greeting them all warmly, sending his many children and grandchildren off to get coffee from the Tim Hortons downstairs (a constantly refreshed small coffee sat beside him, politely sipped though seldom finished).

And he wanted the people to come. All of them. Friend and former foe. Allies and those who’d kept their distance. He knew his life was coming to an end, and his goal was to end well. He wanted to end square. Right. To forgive and be forgiven. He wanted peace, both to have it and to give it.

You see, John was a survivor, a doer, a man of opinions and work. A man who liked things the way he liked them, and he knew—as we all did—that he didn’t always rub people the right way. He was a good man, yes. But sometimes an unyielding man.

Here was his chance to put things right. Here was his chance, in his chair, to talk things out. Here was his chance. And people showed up. Many cups of coffee were had in that hospital room, and again, weeks later, at his funeral.

John inspired me. To set things right. To be a person of peace. To give peace and to receive it too. To make peace an act of will. I will never forget him in that chair. Those many visitors. Those cups of coffee.

This Advent we remember “reconciliation breaking through.” And I keep thinking about the messy middle. Jesus came into the middle, to set things on a course to be made right. He brought peace. But peace is not always something that comes easily, sparkling and floating down from heaven. It is also something you make, something you decide. And it’s hard. It’s something you give away, by choice.

It means you forgive. You sit face to face with people you’ve hurt., with people who have

hurt you. And you give them peace. You say, “Enough.” “This is enough.” You sit together. You drink coffee together and you part as friends. As far as it depends on you, Paul said in Romans 12, live at peace with everybody. And a lot of it depends on you.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you,” said Jesus in John 14:27. I think he meant for us to share it. I know he did. And that is hard. But it is reconciliation breaking through.

Prayer

Forgiving God, help us to choose peace. Amen.

***Rev. Thyra VanKeeken** is pastor of First Christian Reformed Church in Brandon, Manitoba. Thyra is a native of Edmonton, Alberta, a graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary, and a former intern at the Office of Social Justice.*



“I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God . . .”

Revelation 21:2

Many Christians in America seem to think that when Jesus comes again the earth will be destroyed. After true believers are raptured off the planet, they claim, the earth will be burned up to nothing. “This world is not my home, I’m just passing through”—so they sing (and think). But is this view of the future found in Scripture? It may be popular, but is it biblical? Is that what God’s good future is like?

A closer look reveals that this escapist eschatology is not biblical. For example, God’s good future presented to us in the last chapters of Revelation is a mind-boggling vision of the redemption of the earth. Creation is renewed, not destroyed. The Holy City, the new Jerusalem, comes down to earth; we don’t go up to it. Throughout these verses the word for “new” (*kainos* in Greek) means “renewed,” not “absolutely new” (*neos*). God is making all things new, not all new things. These last two chapters of the Bible speak of renewal, repair, restoration. This vision from John is earthy and earthly. This is our home planet, and God’s home is among humans on a heavenly earth.

Why is this important? Because our eschatology shapes our ethics. What we believe about the future shapes how we act in the present. If we believe the world will be destroyed after Christians are raptured off the earth, then, as one scholar puts it, why should Christians care about what will (soon) be demolished? However, if God makes all things new, rather than all new things, then we have good reason to bear witness, by our faithful living, to this vision of earthy and earthly reconciliation. If God makes all things new, then we can and we should be part of God’s restorative work. If God makes all things new, then we can have authentic hope, despite the brokenness around us, that God’s good future of *shalom* will be made real.

In the last chapters of the Bible we relearn that we are God’s earthkeepers and that God will renew the earth. This Advent, may we embrace that calling and that vision with courage and with hope.

Prayer *O God of restoration, in this season of Advent give us courage to be faithful earthkeepers on this our home planet, and fill us with hope that the good future begun in the coming of your Son, Jesus our Lord, will find completion.*

Steve Bouma-Prediger is a professor of theology and ethics at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. His book *For the Beauty of the Earth* won an Award of Merit from Christianity Today in the magazine’s 2002 book awards program. He also directs and teaches in the Environmental Studies Program.



The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

Mark 1:1

In the book of Mark the announcement of Jesus' coming starts like this: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. . . ."

"Son of God" wasn't an unfamiliar term to Mark's readers. Anyone who ever held a coin in their hand would have seen the words. They were written on the outside edge of the silver Roman denarius. "*Divi Filius*," the coin said, with an image of Caesar in the center. *Divi Filius* means "son of the deified one, son of the god." Jesus, Mark, and his followers took the term a step further, they proclaimed that Jesus is *Dei Filius*--not son of someone like god but literally the son of God.

To my ear amplifying a well-known description of Caesar to describe Jesus doesn't sound like reconciliation with the ruling elites of the Roman Empire. It sounds like a direct affront--it sounds like rebellion.

I can barely wrap my mind around this year's Advent devotional theme, *Reconciliation Breaking Through*, but I think that first rebellious sentence of the book of Mark begins to capture something of what this theme might mean. Reconciliation involves not only politely making friends and committing to forgiveness. Usually reconciliation also requires breaking through old ways of thinking and acting and being. This is what Jesus' ministry and kingdom are all about.

For example, in Mark's introduction he exhorts his readers that viewing Caesar as a son of a god isn't good enough anymore. He says there is now a real Son of God, Jesus the Messiah.

The idea of reconciliation needing to break through is probably also why conversations about our criminal justice system have been inflammatory this year. Some participants in the conversation are urging everyone to listen patiently and consider all sides of each story. Other participants shake their heads and say, "What the . . . ? We've been bringing these problems up for decades, and nobody listens. Now all of a sudden it is important that the victims are patient and listen?" I'm with the second group, and it is frustrating that there is even the expectation of the need for debate, since on top of the stacks of individual stories of injustice there are glaringly obvious statistics and the racial injustice is undeniable. (*The New Jim Crow* is a good source for these stats.)

Some participants in the conversation think they support reconciliation, but they don't. Participants on the other side of the conversation want acknowledgment that there have been victims, that there have been offenses, and that whatever structures are permitting those

offenses to continue need to be broken down. That side of the conversation wants real reconciliation to break through.

Jesus broke down unjust political, legal, and social structures as a part of his work of reconciliation. He broke through when lawyers wanted him to convict a woman caught in adultery and he instead scribbled something in the sand and said, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7) (Maybe he scribbled, “Where is the man?”) He broke through when he spoke the beatitudes. He broke through in every parable he taught. His followers broke through when they invited Gentiles to become a part of their worshiping community.

Jesus taught and demonstrated that oppressive systems are not good enough in his kingdom. He is *the Son of God*, and he isn’t afraid to point out brokenness.

How does Jesus call you this Advent to break through old ways and to begin to experience true reconciliation?

Kris Van Engen is the *Congregational Justice Mobilizer for World Renew and for the Office of Social Justice*.



“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Ephesians 4:32

As I reflect on reconciliation, I am reminded of an experience I had as a nurse in a remote aboriginal community in northern Ontario. At shift change, I was told about a patient with ongoing psychiatric issues whose mother was upset with the care we were providing. I went in to see the patient and mother; after asking a few questions, the mother started to become upset with me and told me that the nurses did not care about her son. She said he was not receiving proper treatment because we were white nurses and acting racist toward them. I was a bit shocked, but clearly she needed someone to listen to her without defensiveness. This discussion bothered me for a while because I felt that we were sincerely trying our best.

A few weeks later I was visiting an aboriginal friend in the community when the mother from the clinic stopped at the house. My friend, unaware of our previous interaction, introduced me as her friend, and the three of us ended up sitting down together and having a wonderful conversation. I left my friend’s place with an immense sense of peace that reconciliation had just taken place. From that time on the mother would speak regularly with me and express appreciation for the service her son received from the health-care team.

This experience made me acutely aware of the healing process of reconciliation. God created us to love and forgive each other so we can live in unity. Our world is sinful, and the messy process of reconciliation can be a difficult one of forgiving and learning how to love our neighbor as ourselves.

My friend gave both the mother and me an opportunity to see each other in a new light. She allowed me to recognize the painful, tainted history between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples of Canada and why aboriginal people may still harbor anger toward Europeans. She helped the mother to recognize that although aboriginals may have a negative perception of white people, there is healing in reconciliation.

I learned the value of engaging in real relationships with people in the community so that all of us can recognize our flaws yet be reconciled and live in community together the way God intends. I hope that during this Advent season you can find an unlikely friend and build a bridge into someone else’s world because that’s what Jesus did when he came down to earth.

Prayer

Bridge-building God, you suffered to restore your relationship with us. But your generous

love didn't stop there. You compel us to the often-hard work of reconciling with one another. May we boldly continue your divine assignment.

Heather Kooiman works as a nurse in Attawapiskat First Nation and has served as a camp director in Mishkeegogamang First Nation during the summers. The story above comes from her experiences living and serving in these places.



*“Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper,
but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.
Blessed is the one who always trembles before God,
but whoever hardens their heart falls into trouble.”*

Proverbs 28:13-14

Lately it’s been hard think well of my friends on social media. The recent conversations on systemic racism have revealed a defiant stubbornness in my friends and, honestly, in me. Each new injustice that has come to light has triggered a flood of aggressive commentary and fingerpointing in my newsfeed. It seems something about injustice triggers our primal, fight-or-flight instincts. We become defensive. We block out what our neighbors are trying to tell us. We look away from our communities, focus on evidence from other cities, and hold everything at arm’s length.

I can’t help but feel dissonance in this season as we prepare for God incarnate: God who kept nothing at arm’s length; God who didn’t shrink from brokenness and hurt; God who mourned alongside the mourning; God who plunged fully into our human experience.

Incarnational living is really, really hard for us. Engaging a situation with anything more than impersonal analysis opens the door for someone to point out things in us that we really don’t want to confront. We seem to consistently avoid incarnational relationships with our neighbors so we can avoid dealing with our own cleverly hidden, long-held ugliness. I resonate with Anne Lamott’s journey:

“It took a lot of work to stick with the unpacking of the resentment to realize that it was always about self-loathing — most of these people in the trajectory of the drones I fired were pretty innocent bystanders. The lack of forgiveness had to do with really bad old feelings I had about myself. ...It wouldn’t have affected me if there hadn’t been that age-old contempt a lot of us can still find in ourselves. The mix of self-contempt and grandiosity.”

You don’t have to spend much time with Reformed people to know that self-contempt and grandiosity run deep in us. But something really awful happens when we let them run unchallenged. We get self-righteous. We assume we have all the answers and get defensive when we find out we don’t. We cover our weaknesses and leave no room for grace.

A pastor I respect likes to say “Confession is good for the soul.” I’ve found that confession is also good for my neighbor. Digging up my ugliness, seeing myself through God’s eyes (stripped of both contempt and grandiosity), and receiving grace allows me to be fully present with my neighbor and listen without fear. If I don’t do this regularly, I find my world

shrinks down to just me and everything I'm angry about. That's a far cry from the selfless, humble, and gracious life Jesus calls me to.

Reconciliation with oneself can seem selfish. Honestly, I think the opposite is true. It's selfish to hold onto a made-up version of myself and attack anyone who points out the flaws. It's selfish to ignore the pain and hurt of my neighbors because I'm unwilling to experience discomfort. It's selfish to spend my energy in self-defense and avoidance. It's selfish to support policies and practices that allow me to keep my self-righteousness intact. Practicing reconciliation with myself allows me to identify, own, and bring all the gross ugliness to God in confession. And the grace God offers back flows into my relationships with the people God made and the world God loves. The world God refused to keep at arm's length.

Marie Vogel is the Communications Coordinator for the Office of Social Justice. A life-long member of the CRC, she loves the Contemporary Testimony, good design, DIY projects, anything striped, and helping the Church be a prophetic voice.



"I do not give as the world gives. Do not be afraid." ~John 14:27

There is a face in my memory that constantly pushes its way to the surface of my thoughts. It is the face of a man I met in Palestine this summer, and it is his eyes that haunt me. He is sitting across from me, sipping tea, softly explaining in his gentle Arabic what life has been like for him and his family in recent weeks. Israeli soldiers have come to his home on multiple occasions during the night as his family sleeps. The soldiers wake the family up with guns pointed at their faces. The soldiers move through the house, shouting and throwing things down. On one such visit, this man was beaten so badly that he lost use of one of his kidneys. The beating occurred in front of his children. As he continues on with his telling, his youngest daughter stands near him, burrowing into his side. I see the remnants of terror in her eyes. He puts his arm around her and tells me she is no longer able to sleep and has been wetting the bed. The grief I witness in his eyes as he says this presses against my heart like a bruise, and something in me begins to ache.

Before we leave, this man and his children lead us across the street to an old, crumbling home. They own it, he says proudly, and they will begin to fix it up for the future. They point out their plans for the walls, the windows, the ceiling. His youngest daughter scrapes away some dust from the floor and shows me a few pieces of soft tile, still left there under all the rubble, full of possibility. The ache in me grows and begins to crawl up the rungs of my ribs to my throat, and I wonder at the trite ways that I used to fling around words like "hope".

I returned home from Palestine full of stories such as these, and shaking like a leaf.

Advent is simultaneously a time of grief and a time of joy. It is a season saturated with longing, and yet it does not seek to tie the world up into neat little bows and continue on its way. It is raw to the needs of the world, and it acknowledges the pain that is wrapped up in waiting. At its core, though, is the promise that God is with us, and therefore we continue to hope. Despite this world's harsh realities, we plan and we work at fixing up its rooms for the freedom to come.

We serve a God who suffers with the world while actively liberating it.

May the urgency of our grief move us too, to suffer for the work of justice in the world, and may the liberating hope of *God with us* sustain us as we go. This world will give us grief, but take heart: The Lord is come.

Sarah Hamm recently co-led a six-week educational trip to Palestine. She is currently studying Arabic and hopes to one day work in the Middle East full-time. Sarah currently resides in Grand Rapids, Michigan.



“He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”

Isaiah 2:4

In Bogota, Colombia, the seasons never change. Early fall weather reigns year-round. I find it hard to imagine the coming of Christmas when each day is filled with the same mix of sunshine and rain as the day before.

In Colombia it seems like we have been waiting for change for decades, stuck in eternal war and violence. We’re told that even when the current peace talks are signed, rebuilding our country will take as long as the conflict lasted. We become overwhelmed thinking about the 50 years of hard work ahead of us.

Will this season of armed internal conflict ever come to an end?

Just as I decorate my house for Christmas and attempt to smell snow in the air, we prepare for the end of the conflict. For many Colombians, this means continuing to engage in the everyday acts of reconciliation that they have been practicing for years, as a way of living out their hope in the reconciling work of the Christ-child.

In communities where more than 15 years of violence generated mistrust, leaders now joke and laugh together. Their decision to engage daily life with one another for the benefit of their communities reflects the reconciliation needed for a new future.

Our everyday choices to view others as allies and even as friends, not enemies, continually act to break cycles of violence. Yet in Colombia an integral part of reconciliation is the work for structural change. A new future requires that we advocate for this. We leave the walls of our communities and our churches to demand that the state also comply with the responsibility to create peace.

We therefore greet each other with joy and get to work: we march to demand that the peace talks continue; we document human-rights violations and acts of faith; we participate in bridge-building meetings; and, above all, we live out a new season of hope in the midst of war.

Change is coming. The weather might remain the same, but the peace of Christmas draws near, one reconciling step at a time.

Prayer

God of hope, allow us to see and participate in your reconciling work, even when change

seems impossible. This Advent season, guide us beyond our walls and lead us into your work of hope in the world.

***Anna Vogt** spent two years living and working in the community of Mampujan on the Caribbean coast of Colombia with the Mennonite Central Committee's Seed Program. Since then, she has transitioned to the capital of Colombia, Bogota, where she continues to work with MCC and its partner Justapaz. She loves coffee, llamas, and writing about life through her blog.*



“An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”

Luke 2:9-10

Happy Holidays! Merry Christmas! Seasons Greetings! Feliz Navidad! Christmas is the time of year when you have the widest selection of salutations at your disposal. That last one would be what gets used most here in Honduras.

How about one more though? “Don’t be afraid!”

OK, maybe that doesn’t sound so great for a Christmas card. But the phrase seems popular with angels.

First, one runs into Zechariah in the Temple: “Do not be afraid.”

Next, it’s off to Mary’s place: “Do not be afraid.”

Then to the shepherds out in a field: “Fear not.”

It’s the original Christmas greeting.

We rarely associate fear with Christmas, but in reading the story of Jesus’ birth in the first two chapters of Luke, we see the words “fear” or “afraid” show up eight times. People had reason to be shaken. Jesus was a vulnerable baby, but that didn’t make his arrival any less intense.

When we read about the baby Jesus, we read about people getting scared, getting knocked out of their comfort zones. This baby changed everything. Some people went with the change. Mary and the shepherds, for example.

Some fought against it. Herod, for example. When he found out that a new king had been born, we read that he was “troubled.” Captivated by selfish power he ended up murdering the babies living in Bethlehem, trying to stop this new king.

Herod reminds me of some of the powerful people whom the Association for a More Just Society runs into in Honduras. Our calling is to fight against violence and corruption in a country that has the highest murder rate in the world.

There are some “strong” Herods here in Honduras—people who are afraid of Christmas. That’s to say, they’re afraid of a world where fearless love jeopardizes a system of power that feeds on violence and intimidation. They’re scared that when they want to say, “Be

afraid!” the baby Jesus still says, “Don’t be afraid!”

Many Christians in Honduras are finding strength in Christ to stand up to these scary Herods. Some of them are my co-workers who risk their lives for the cause of justice. In doing so, they remind me of the angel who went to the shepherds, not during the day, but in the night—and then, while shattering the darkness with unquenchable light, called out, “Don’t be afraid! There is good news of great joy!”

As Christians in any country, we too must be ready to share this message and to follow a game-changing Savior of whom we read: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4-5).

Prayer

God, we pray that you would show us the dark fields, the ones we might otherwise avoid or ignore, where we can shine a light. Stir up passion and courage in us to stand up to the Herods and to shine a fearless light. A Christmas light. A light that welcomes reconciliation.

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