

## The Miracle of Reconciliation

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, June 19, 1988. Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 5:1-12; Psalm 48; 2 Corinthians 5:18-6:2; Mark 4:35-41.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Simon Weisenthal lost 89 family members in Nazi concentration camps during WWII. Now he's a Nazi hunter. Weisenthal is often asked about his obsession. Why hunt down men in their seventies and eighties for crimes committed fifty years ago? After so long why not just forgive? Weisenthal has tried to answer these questions in a little book called *The Sunflower*. It begins with a haunting story, a remembrance of a true event that occurred during his imprisonment in a Polish concentration camp.

Wiesenthal had been assigned that day to clean rubbish out of a hospital that the Germans had set up for wounded soldiers carried in from the Eastern front. A nurse walked over to him, took his arm, ordered him to come with her, and led him upstairs, along a row of stinking wounded soldiers, to the side of a bed where a young soldier, his head wrapped in yellow, pus-stained bandages, was dying. He was maybe twenty-two, an SS Trooper. The soldier, whose name was Karl, reached out and grabbed Wiesenthal's hand, clamped it as if he feared Wiesenthal would run away. He told Wiesenthal that he had to speak to a Jew. He had to confess the terrible things he'd done so that he could be forgiven. He couldn't die in peace without some hope that he had been forgiven.

He told Weisenthal about his boyhood and early days in the Hitler Youth Movement. He told of action along the Russian front and the increasingly harsh measures his SS unit had taken against the Jews. And then he told of a terrible atrocity, when all the Jews in one town were herded into a wooden frame building that was then set on fire. Burning bodies fell from

the second floor, and the SS soldiers-- and he was one of them-- shot them as they fell. He started to tell of one child in particular. He recalled, "Behind the window of the second floor, I saw a man with a small child in his arms, a young boy with black hair and dark eyes. His clothing was on fire. By his side stood a woman, probably the mother of the child. With his free hand the man covered the child's eyes-- then he jumped into the street. Seconds later the mother followed. We shot... Oh, God... I shall never forget it-- it haunts me."

Several times Weisenthal tried to leave the room, but each time the wounded soldier reached out with a cold, trembling hand and begged him to stay. Finally, after about two hours, the young man paused and said, "I know that what I have told you is terrible. I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. I know that what I am asking is almost too much, but without your answer I cannot die in peace."

Weisenthal stood in silence for some time, staring at the man's bandaged face. Then he tells us what he did. "I stood up and looked in his direction, at his folded hands. At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room." He left the soldier in torment, unforgiven.

Weisenthal survived the concentration camp, but he couldn't forget the SS trooper. He wondered, troubled, for a long time whether he should have forgiven the soldier. Finally he decided to tell the story in his book and he ended the book with an awful question for every reader: "What would you have done?" He sent the story to 32 rabbis, Christian theologians and philosophers and asked for their responses. Had he done right? Should he have forgiven the SS criminal.

The respondents gave a clear consensus that Weisenthal was *right* in leaving the soldier unforgiven. Only six thought Wiesenthal had done

wrong. Some questioned the whole idea of forgiveness. Herbert Marcuse, the philosopher responded, "One cannot, and should not go around happily killing and torturing and then, when the moment has come, simply ask, and receive forgiveness." But the most persuasive arguments came from those who insisted that forgiveness can only be granted by the very people who have been wronged. "You would have had no right to forgive him in the name of people who had not authorized you to do so. What people have done to *you, yourself*, you can, if you like, forgive and forget."

I don't know what I would've done. I can never be sure how I'd act in someone else's shoes. The 32 responses show his question has no easy answer. But the Bible does add an interesting twist to one aspect of the dilemma he faced. It relates to an old-fashioned theological word that kept coming up in Weisenthal's book. The word is "reconciliation."

One phrase from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians declares that Christians do have the right to offer forgiveness on behalf of another. In that passage, Paul says that we have been given "the ministry of reconciliation." "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors," he says, "as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."

Let me give you some examples of what it means to be a minister of reconciliation, an ambassador of Christ proclaiming forgiveness to those who didn't sin against you personally? For some Christians it means trying to put reconciliation into practice by building homes and settling in the line of gunfire which, until the recent cease fire, shattered the peace along the Nicaraguan border. For some mothers in Northern Ireland, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, it means walking through the streets and pleading for reconciliation. I also think of Chuck Colson's Prison

Fellowship volunteers who go into crowded, and violence filled cell blocks to proclaim forgiveness. In the church where marriages are breaking up, where children have become alienated, where social distance separates races or social groups there exists a need for reconciliation: a need for someone to take on voluntarily the burdens of others and offer forgiveness even before it's sought.

One man, Will Campbell, has taken that phrase, "Be ye reconciled," as his life motto. In his autobiography *Brother to a Dragonfly*, he explains that his Christian love and compasssion once extended to blacks and the oppressed in the South, but not to rednecks and members of the Ku Klux Klan. But after three close friends were murdered by the KKK, he heard a message from God that defied every human instinct. He was to go, as a minister of reconciliation, to the very group who had killed his friends. He was to become, and in fact did become, an "apostle to the rednecks."

Of all people, the apostle Paul was pre-eminently a "Minister of Reconciliation." That term was especially meaningful to him because he also had a record of "war crimes" committed, in his case, against Christians. God forgave him for those crimes, and the apostle to the Gentiles never seemed to get over that startling feeling of being reconciled. William Barclay comments, "Here is the Christian's proud privilege and almost terrifying responsibility. The honour of Christ and of the Church are in (our) hands. By (our) every word and action (we) can make men (and women) think more- or less- of his Church and of his Master." "So then we are acting as ambassadors on Christ's behalf, for God is sending you his invitation through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Let us pray :