

Phil Yancey in his book, Prayer, recounts this episode from Jamie Cardinal Sin and his response to a woman who attended his weekly audiences with a message to him from God.

He brushed her off several times, but she kept coming back. Finally he said, "We Catholics have strict rules governing visions and messages from God. I need to test your authenticity. I want you to go back and ask God about a particular sin I recently confessed in private. If you ask God and he tells you the answer, I'll know your vision is genuine."

The next week she returned and he quizzed her, a bit nervously, "Well, did you ask God about my sin?"

"I did."

"And did God answer?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"God said that he couldn't remember."

Paul is reminding the congregation in Corinth and us that we have been called to a ministry of reconciliation and forgiveness. The theme of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, as we have said, is one of building community and relationships through reconciliation and forgiveness. We have been called to a ministry of reconciliation. Why? Because Christ was in the world reconciling us to God. We are forgiven because of Christ's reconciling act on the cross. The world is beginning to see God in a new light.

God's presence was once measured by fear, thunder and lightning. At Sinai the mountain shook as God came. The people trembled. They were fearful of being in the very presence of God. They tell Moses in Exodus 20:19, "*You speak and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us or we will die*" (NIV). The people are willing to let Moses speak to God but they are fearful of being in God's presence or of hearing God's voice.

In Christ a new image of God is breaking forth in the world. God is redesigning his image. We become new creatures in Christ. The old is gone and the new has come. It is an image of hope, love, reconciliation and forgiveness. Because of this new image we are now called to the ministry of reconciliation, love and hope. We are to be a people who build a new community with these pillars as the foundations of who we are. We are to demonstrate God's love for the whole world, not just one nation or people.

In other words, what Israel has failed to do we are now called on to accomplish. We are now given the title or designation as ambassadors of Christ. Those who carry this title are to live and speak as the one they represent. Or as Paul says, "*God is making his appeal through us*" (II Cor. 5:20). This puts a great responsibility on our shoulders. We are now God's ambassadors in the world. We are the ones to carry out the message of reconciliation and forgiveness. Imagine the money Tiger Woods could save? He has hired a new image maker to remake his image. Christ has done it already!

Our first step is to be reconciled to God. God is waiting to welcome us home. The prodigal parent is watching for our return and there is a party being planned. A banquet is ready; all we need to do is to come home. The shepherd rejoices when the lost sheep is found. Heaven celebrates when we return back to God. God longs to reconcile us to himself.

However, in the world it is often, "three strikes and your out." We may forgive once or twice but beyond that too much is expected. Paul, though, says that Christ is in the world reconciling us to God and in doing so, God does not count our trespasses (sins) against us.

This is why I liked Cardinal Sin's story. It is one of hope and reconciliation – God forgives and forgets.

Yet, we find it hard to forgive, even ourselves. We often remember the sins of our past and wonder how God would ever forgive us. We can't seem to shake our past and we remember. And when we do come to grips with our forgiveness, we look at and remember the sins of others. We like to hold it against them. We wonder how we can love them and how God can forgive them. We may even wonder if God really knows how bad they have been. How can God forgive such actions? We forget Paul's words, "*that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them*" (5:19).

As the Psalmist says, "*Happy/Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven.*" Our sins are forgiven. God does not count them against us. And we have not been given the task of counting sins! Our call is to reconciliation and forgiveness.

Why then do we count the sins of others? Sermon a few weeks ago, "Minding our own business", keyed in on this theme. We wonder if God really sees the things they have done. We like to keep a list of offenses. Easy to point out their sins. We remember when they did this or that. They did not call us when we were sick. They did not say "hello" when we met them on the street. They did this or that. But, before we start throwing stones, where do we stand? How many people have we neglected to call when they were sick? How many times have we failed to say "hello"? Maybe before we start throwing stones we should do a little inner-inspection.

Paul writes to the congregation in Corinth and to us, we are called to be Christ's ambassadors bringing to the world the message of reconciliation and forgiveness. It is not our message. It is Christ's. A few weeks ago we looked at poor ole Jonah in our Adult Sunday School class. Remember, Jonah was called to take God's message to Nineveh. It was not Jonah's message, it was God's. Jonah was not happy with what God was saying, it was a message of judgment. Are we any happier with God's message today? – it has changed from judgment to reconciliation and forgiveness and yet we are too often reluctant to share it. We want the message of judgment. It would deliver that real good. We are not called to give our message but God's – to be a reconciling force in the world

Lent calls to remember the depth of God's love, care and concern for the world. God comes to Bethlehem and now faces the cross – God was IN the world reconciling us back to God through Christ and now is IN the world reconciling it through **our sharing Christ's** message of hope and reconciliation. We see God's reconciling action through the love of Christ for God's world and the power of love and what love can do. This then is our task as ambassadors of the Living Christ – as God does not count trespasses, neither do we. As God loves the world so do we. We are God's reconciling agents in the world.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989
Yancey, Phil, Prayer, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2006 (p.270-71)