

**March 1, 2017 - Ash Wednesday**  
**II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

He came alone to the counseling center the first time to see me. He wanted to know if I could provide family therapy by meeting only with adults – no children present. There was a situation, he said, a troublesome problem really. Jack was in his mid thirties, a soft-spoken, easy going and likeable man. He explained that he was married to Ellie, and that they had a daughter Jody who was nearly four years old. There had been some major conflict shortly after Jody was born, conflict between Ellie and Jack's mother, Jane. Jack was unhappy because he felt like he had been forced to choose sides. He had chosen to stand with his wife. What this meant was that Jody, now almost four had no contact with Jack's parents, her grandparents, for the past three years. No contact, even though Jack and Ellie did not live all that far away from Jack's parents.

Well, Jack wasn't very hopeful that there could be any improvement in his sad, conflicted family situation. For the second session, Ellie came with Jack and I listened as they told their story. The third session I met alone with Jack's parents, Jane and Tom and listened to their side of the story. The fourth session Ellie, Jack and both his parents Jane and Tom were present. Odd to me at the time, Ellie insisted on sitting in the seat closest the door, and in fact she did leave the session two-thirds of the way through. She didn't look especially angry or distraught as she got up, but she moved very abruptly, quickly, like a startled deer. There were several phone conversations with Ellie between sessions to learn more about what had distressed and frightened her so much that she needed to leave the room when her in-laws were present. I learned that Jody had nearly died within her first year of life. Ellie was an anxious mother, and Jane had a forceful personality and was not afraid to speak her mind when it came to the care and raising of her granddaughter. I met once more with Jane and Tom, and then I gave all four of them an assignment. I asked each of them to write a letter describing their feelings about this emotional chasm they had been staring into, and its effects on them. I asked them specifically to reflect and write about their anger, sadness, fear, regret, and what each of them needed to give him/herself right now. They were to address the letter to whomever they chose and to place it in an envelope and seal it, and bring the letters back to me in a month. I told them the letters were not intended to be mailed, but this work of reflecting and writing was very important. When they brought their letters back, I explained that I would not be reading the letters they had written, but I was going to hold them for safekeeping. Were they ready yet to let go of the years of pain and grief and anger and bitterness and misunderstanding that they had poured out from their hearts in those letters? Each of them agreed they wanted to

move toward letting go of the past, for Jody's benefit and for the sake of their own future relationships with her. The next step after the letters was to arrange a visit in a neutral place between Jody and her grandparents. Ellie was anxious about this next step, so Jack got the job of being her "coach", encouraging and reassuring her that it would be okay as they made plans for this outing. He had been by Ellie's side all this time, but he also wanted Jody to know her grandparents, too, to build a positive and loving relationship with them. That first play date visit in three years went very well. Ellie seemed to relax a bit. Jack and his parents were very happy that relationships which had been strained and tattered for so long were in process of being restored. Healing had begun. The work of reconciliation was well underway. And they expected and wanted it to continue.

*"It's time,"* the apostle Paul says, *"now is the acceptable time, the day of salvation."* Today is Ash Wednesday and our Lenten journey begins, the journey to the cross and ultimately to Resurrection and new life. This Lenten journey is about Jesus' walk to Jerusalem and our walk with him.

It's good for us to listen again with fresh ears to the words of Paul, this reminder that *"now is the acceptable time, the day of salvation"*. We begin the Lenten journey in a hopeful place, because on this day we dare to look at the human condition, our condition - deeply and honestly. We resist the instinct to run away like a startled, spooked deer. We name the realities of sin and death. And it really is a tremendous relief to hear and speak these truths: the truth that at times, there has been no health in us and we have wandered off from God. The truth that for each of us life is time-limited. Each of us lives with an unknown but definite expiration date. These truths are sobering, humbling, and also reorienting and life-giving. Our lives are shot through with the presence of individual and corporate good and evil, sin and glimpses of holiness, brokenness and moments of healing, the finality of physical death and the blessed wonder of life.

Yes, this Lenten journey is about truth-telling. It is not about taking on a six week self-improvement project, not simply "spring training for the spirit and soul" as one preacher described Lent.

Lent is much more radical than a concentrated period of attempting to whip our lives into shape. The Lenten disciplines of fasting, praying, and almsgiving are not intended to simply make us "better people", improved versions of ourselves. Lent is an invitation to surrender our will and spirit to the deeply transformative possibilities that God wants to work in us through Christ. Lent is an opportunity to experience the power of God to make things right, to reconcile all that is amiss by means of love and forgiveness,

through self-emptying and sacrifice, through directing the focus of life toward serving others. Our Lenten disciplines are aids to help us align ourselves more closely to the heart of God, to holy and purifying love. Especially in this season of Lent, I would commend for your consideration engaging in one of the sacramental rites of our tradition found in the Prayer Book, the reconciliation of a penitent, sometimes referred to as individual private confession. The “rule of thumb” for its practice in the Episcopal Church is that “all may, none must, some should.” Having personally engaged in the rite several times, it each time has been a powerfully graced meeting, leading me humbly to deeper conversion of heart and life, and to deeper gratitude for the mercy and forgiveness of God. Engaging in private confession unburdens the heart and provides a longed-for fresh start, a “means of grace” to get reoriented to God’s ways on the rugged walk of discipleship.

This work of reconciliation as Paul describes it for the Corinthians and us, is about change, change from the inside out. Paul offers himself and those who worked with him as examples of this transformative power and how it allowed them to endure and thrive in the face of the most difficult circumstances: “afflictions, hardships, calamities, imprisonments, riots, labor, sleepless nights, hunger.” The reconciliation and transformation that God worked in them through Christ resulted in “purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.”

With that kind of excellent and abundant fruit produced by God’s transforming power at work in them, Paul could say boldly to the church members in Corinth, “You too, each of you alone and all of you together – be reconciled to God. Christ has set things right, and now you are his representatives. You too, are meant to be “ambassadors of reconciliation”.

Jack and his family who came to see me for counseling were looking for help to become ambassadors of reconciliation, seeking to set broken and estranged relationships right again. And I was privileged to act as an ambassador of reconciliation, guiding and encouraging them to think and act differently, to act in ways that honored their deep desire for restored right relationships.

Reconciliation is the work of Lent: honest to God truth telling and repentance – turning back toward the Holy One who loves us beyond our imagining. Accepting God’s forgiveness and then extending forgiveness to others. Reconciliation brings new life through our dying to what God knows just isn’t working in us and for us, isn’t bringing light and life and love, hope and healing, justice and joy.

The awe and wonder of Lent is the opportunity we are given to hear and experience once again the incredible lengths to which God will go in love for us, to bring us back home to God's self. A self who in the person of Jesus was emptied to become a servant, to face all that life can be and is – the intertwining of darkness and light, sin and holiness, life and death. We are called to cooperate and join Christ in the transformative work of living, dying, and being raised to new life in these next forty days.

Friends, my prayer is that this will be a holy and healing Lent for each of us, and through us, for our world. The times in which we are living cry out for “ambassadors of reconciliation”. May we be encouraged and strengthened by each other on this journey, fellow travelers each of us, and all of us together seeking to experience the abundant grace that God freely offers us daily, moment by moment. The good work of Lent and the way of Christ is reconciliation, which Jesus has begun for us. The time, the day of salvation for its growing and blossoming in us is NOW. Amen.