

How to Get Along

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Friendship" by Brigitte McReynolds

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds
by the power of your Holy Spirit,
May your Scriptures read us
as your Word is proclaimed,
and may we hear with joy
what you say to us today.
Amen.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:13-22 (NRSV)

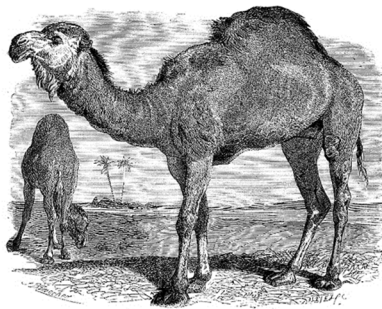
But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have

access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – How to Get Along



There's a Sufi parable about a father who unexpectedly passed away. In the will, he gave directives as to how his caravan of camels should be divided amongst his sons.

- Half of the camels would go to his firstborn,
- a third to his middle son,
- and a ninth to his youngest son.

When they counted the camels, they found there were seventeen. The grieving sons fought and fought because it was impossible to distribute the camels according to their father's wishes. And so the conflict began to escalate.

They decided to travel deep into the desert to one of the community's wisest and most trusted leaders—surely she would help them sort out their conundrum. She offered her sympathies—and also gave a gift of a camel to these grieving, yet contentious brothers. She urged them to go back home and take another look at their father's will and see if they missed anything the first time.

With 18 camels—suddenly the math worked.

- The oldest claimed 9 camels—half of the herd of 18.
- The middle son took 6 camels—a third of the herd.
- The youngest took 2 camels—a ninth of the herd.
- But when they counted their inheritance
- the numbers totaled 17 camels!

With gratitude, the brothers returned the gift of the 18th camel back to the wise elder.

Jesus is our 18th camel to reconcile the complicated division problems the human family faces today.

Human history is a sad story of mistrust and conflict, especially with those who are different from us. Racial divides are found throughout the Bible: You have the Israelites at odds with the Philistines and the Canaanites and Moabites and Edomites and the Samaritans...

An archeological dig discovered this inscription on one of the pillars of the Temple in Jerusalem:

No man of another race is to enter within the fence and enclosure around the temple. Whoever is caught will have only himself to thank for the death which follows.

In the New Testament, the entire book of Acts is about racial struggles between Jew and Gentile. It's the risen Christ who helps bring racial reconciliation between these two very different groups—but even then, there was an eventual parting of ways between Judaism and Christianity.

These racial divides haven't stopped since Bible times—they continue in world history and in American history to this day. All too often, the blood of ethnicity, racism, and nationalism flow stronger than the waters of baptism and our confession of Christ.

Despite these real challenges—we have hope to face our hostilities. Our Creator who created every human being, has sent us Christ to heal the wounds, break down the walls, and bring people together—all through the blood of Christ.

Our passage reminds us that we have to remember our past, where we came from. At one time we were estranged from Christ—having no hope and without God. But God changed our situation—and he sent us Christ. This gift and new life frees us to be thankful and humble. With grace, there's no room to be prideful in our group or disdainful of those different from us. When we remember we're a forgiven people, we also become a forgiving people. The cross of Christ brings healing to, not only our vertical relationship with God, but also healing to our horizontal relationships with one another. These two relationships make the cross.

You can't have the cross without the vertical and the horizontal reconciliation—anything less isn't the full gospel.

It was 1969 and there was racial tension in America. Mr. Rogers—who was also Rev. Rogers—was a Presbyterian minister called to reach children through the medium of television. Don't let Mr. Rogers' hypnotic voice, cardigan sweater, and blue sneakers fool you. He had a radical message for children and adults alike about reconciliation across races in tense times.

Watch this very special scene... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ftbjo5XdZU>

Jesus of Nazareth is a new kind of human—like none other. A human like us in every way, except for sin. Fully human, fully divine, he can relate with us. And Christ has made possible for us a new kind of life to live. Christ perfectly fulfilled the law—he did what we never could do. He makes the impossible possible for us when we trust in him. And this is the beautiful thing about faith in Christ—

All different kinds of people can become one new kind of human together and we can live a new kind of life, that we never could live on our own individually.

Though very different, we have Christ in common.

- We are in Christ and Christ is in us.
- We live in Christ and Christ lives in us.
- Christ lives through us.
- It's a union that holds us together.
- We—though many—are the one body of Christ.

We, the body of Christ, are composed of a whole bunch of different kinds of people. We all—Jew/Gentile, black/white, wealthy/poor, male/female, young/old—all go to Christ to have access to the Father and the Spirit.

Previously distanced from one another, we've been brought near by the blood of Christ. Our animosity and rancor have been put to death on the cross. Our calling is to believe in Christ and trust that our walls of enmity and barriers of bitterness have been obliterated and we can move past them, rather than holding on to them.

Where there was hatred and discord, Christ is our peace. Our pride and prejudice are healed. In Christ, peace is not a proposition or a point, peace is a person, peace personified. He's our Prince of peace in a season of strife. And Christ provides the power for us to be peacemakers.

Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us that peace comes to the places and people where there is anxiety, temptation, and discord. Our time and our place is perfectly poised for Christ to do his work in our midst.

"I'm leaving you with a gift," says Jesus. "Peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid."

Immanuel, this is a time to listen, to listen to Christ and to listen to new and different voices within the one body of Christ. For a time, pause the familiar voices that confirm what you already know so well. Voices that might encourage you to be impervious to other voices, assuring you to stay just as you are. Dare to listen to voices you are unfamiliar with, voices that you have to strain and struggle to understand. It's well worth the effort, for these new and different voices will deepen our understanding and experience of Christ. We lose out if we stay disconnected and estranged from one another.

In Christ, our reconciled and redeemed differences now enrich and enhance us, rather than enrage us. We begin to see our manifold backgrounds add to rather than subtract from our witness. No longer strangers and foreigners, we're fellow members in the household of God, fellow citizens, saints, and siblings with God's people, in the forever family of God.

Christ is our chief cornerstone—and each of us, brick by brick rest upon him and one another. As living stones, we're built up to be a temple of the Holy Spirit. Together we worship God and are changed and united.

My mom is a prayer warrior. I thank God for my mom and her prayers over me—to this very day. And she lifts up many in prayer. She has instilled in me the belief in the power of prayer. About ten years

ago my mom felt called to pray for the Community Women's Bible Study that met at our church—First Presbyterian Church of River Forest, Illinois.

An invitation was extended to all who would like to join my mom in the Maxwell Room on Tuesdays at 9:00 am each week for prayer. The following Tuesday, one woman arrived to pray with my mom. Laurice. And soon thereafter Laurice's friend Ruthy joined this group of 70 year old+ prayer warriors—a white woman and two black women, every Tuesday for five years. They not only prayed together, they laughed together, and ate together. Eat, Pray, Love. And they shared their stories.

Laurice was a sharecropper in Tennessee in her early years. From age four, she helped her mom working on the land, fishing, and milking cows. She went to a segregated school that had a different academic calendar, so that children could miss school when they had to work in the fields. To get away from sharecropping in Tennessee, Laurice moved to Chicago after graduating from high school.

It was prayer, and their love for Christ—that brought these three very different women together in a beautiful friendship. Christians are called to not only pursue friendship, but to pursue justice on behalf of those who suffer injustice. This too is a part of the Christian calling to reconciliation, to really hear their story and the hardships endured just because they have a different skin tone.

This isn't easy—it's radical and it can get you in trouble. I like how evangelical authors Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice at the Duke Center for Reconciliation put it:

The church's calling is to be an interruption of the story of division and violence in the world, pointing to the peace of God's new creation. Through Christ we offer concrete examples of another way—the way of peace and reconciliation. Reconciliation is God's mission in a broken world.

Immanuel, this is our high calling, and this is how we can truly get along, all of us together in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Friendship" by Brigitte McReynolds, www.brittemcreynolds.com

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