

Song of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 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. 20 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. 21 God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

Summer of 2015, the song was everywhere. "Shut Up and Dance." If you turned on the radio, went to a mall or attended a wedding reception, you certainly heard this song by the group Walk the Moon. "The woman is my des-tin-y ... She said ooh ooh ohh ... Shut up and dance with me." Impossible to ignore. Or avoid.

The song was an earworm -- a catchy piece of music that lodges itself deep in your brain. Over the years, there have been many such tunes that get into our heads and then refuse to get out. Think of ... "Ding, Dong, the Witch is Dead" from *The Wizard of Oz*, Disney's "It's a Small World." "Who Let the Dogs Out" by Baha Men. "Shut Up and Kiss Me" by Mary Chapin Carpenter, "We Danced" by Brad Paisley, "The Dance" or "I've Got Friends in Low Places" by Garth Brooks, "Brown-Eyed Girl" by Van Morrison, "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'" by the Righteous Brothers, Michael Jackson's "Thriller" or Queen's "We Will Rock You" or "I Will Always Love You" by Whitney Houston. And worst of all: Psy's "Gangnam Style."

So what makes these songs so viral and addictive? It may not be one of the most pressing questions of our times, but social scientists are trying to provide an answer anyway. Some studies point to the power of background singers or high pitches. One study attempted to link the popularity of these songs to our gross domestic product.

But the newest explanation focuses on *lyrics*. After studying every pop hit since 1958, researchers have discovered that a song's popularity is tied to *the simplicity of the lyrics and how often they are repeated*. They are finding that the human brain has a weakness for plainness.

Tempo does not appear to matter, according to one of the researchers. Instead, the key is a chorus that is repeated frequently using a limited vocabulary. "Shut Up and Dance" achieves this with four simple words repeated 12 times. DJ Evan Reitmeyer is asked to play the song at almost every Washington-area wedding reception. "It's so simple and so repetitive," he said to *The Washington Post*. "The first time I heard it, I said, 'That's a hit.' You can just tell right away." [NOTE 1]



Researchers use a theory in psychology to explain this: *processing fluency*. The theory says that people are more likely to engage in a behavior if it is easy to do. Makes sense, right? In a nutshell, "human brains get really jazzed about things that are easy to grasp and repeat."

Processing fluency explains the success of simple designs, such as the rounded corners of the iPhone. It reveals why we prefer directions printed in a font that is simple instead of complicated. And it explains why we cannot get the chorus of "Who Let the Dogs Out" out of our brains. *Who let the dogs out*

So what do you do about it if you can't get a song out of your head? Relief is on the way. Folk wisdom has it that if you sing the Oscar Mayer wiener jingle to yourself three times ("I wish I were an Oscar Mayer wiener ..."), it will banish whatever other ditty has been rattling around your cranium. There's only one problem with that prescription. Like a blue jay that invades another bird's nest, the Oscar Mayer jingle will become the next song you can't get out of your head. Oh, well. Every prescription has its side effects.

It turns out a much better remedy exists. A simple sliver of gum may banish those irritating scraps of music that embed themselves in our brains, British researchers found. A series of experiments revealed that, when people chewed gum right after listening to an especially catchy tune, they were less likely to be plagued by the pesky piece of music, according to the study published this week in *The Journal of Experimental Psychology*. "The study was based on the idea that there is an overlap between the memory systems responsible for recalling speech and music and those systems responsible for actually producing speech and music," says C. Philip Beaman, the study's lead author and an associate professor of cognitive science at the Centre for Cognition Research and the School of Psychology & Clinical Language Sciences at the University of Reading, U.K. "There is evidence that vigorous chewing both interferes with memory for speech, and makes imagining tunes, specifically pitch and melody, more difficult and less vivid." --Linda Carroll, "Earworm? This one simple trick will get rid of it," *TODAY*, May 14, 2015, today.com

Paul was ahead of his time in employing processing fluency in 2 Corinthians. In today's text, he is singing a song of reconciliation: "All this is from God, who *reconciled* us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of *reconciliation*; that is, in Christ God was *reconciling* the world to himself ... and entrusting the message of *reconciliation* to us. ... on behalf of Christ, *be reconciled* to God" (vv. 18-20, emphases added). Reconciled ... reconciliation ... reconciling ... reconciliation ... be reconciled. **Simple words, repeated frequently.** You see that is one of the reasons for the repetition in modern Christian worship songs. They repeat a simple phrase so that it gets stuck inside ones heart and head. There are much worse things than a poignant Christian phrase to have stuck in your head. [NOTE 2]

At the very heart of the Christian faith is reconciliation -- the reconciliation of people to God and people one to another. Paul drives this home through simplicity and

repetition, knowing that "human brains get really jazzed about things that are easy to grasp and repeat."

But *what exactly is reconciliation?* In a sermon for the Duke Center for Reconciliation, New Testament scholar Richard Hays says that the interesting thing about the word "reconciliation" in ordinary Greek usage is that it is not typically a religious term. "Rather, it is a word drawn from the sphere of politics; it refers to dispute resolution. So one could speak of the diplomatic reconciliation of warring nations or, in the sphere of personal relationships, the reconciliation of an estranged husband and wife." Reconciliation can be defined in many ways. At The Reconciliation Project, they see reconciliation as a restoration of the recognition of humanity. Put simply, it means coming back to a place where people are seen as people instead of objects. When we see people as people, they count like we count. We recognize their humanity, as well as our OWN. --From *The Reconciliation Project Website*. Thereconciliationproject.org. Retrieved October 16, 2015. The practice of peace and reconciliation is one of the most vital and artistic of human actions. --Thich Nhat Hanh. A very wise man once said, "The first to apologize is the bravest. The first to forgive is the strongest. The first to forget is the happiest." [NOTE 3]

The apostle Paul says that God "reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18). God has worked through Christ to resolve a dispute with us, repairing the relationship that had been broken by sin. The work of reconciliation has been started by God, and now Christians are challenged to offer a ministry of reconciliation, resolving disputes between individuals and communities. But this is difficult when our culture loves revenge stories. Here are the titles of just a few of the most famous movies that are mainly about revenge: *Carrie* (you're not going to make fun of me); *Unforgiven* (revenge western style); *Ransom* (Mel Gibson will make someone pay); *Cape Fear* (bad guy goes to jail, bad guy gets out of jail, bad guy gets revenge with your family); *First Wives Club* (divorcees who know how to get even) and *Taken or Taken II* (don't mess with Liam Neeson);

[NOTE 4] We can offer a ministry of reconciliation, says Hays, using "practices that show unity, love, mercy, forgiveness and a self-giving grace that the world could not even dream of apart from Christ." This is a message that the highly polarized and fractured Christian community in Corinth needed to hear, and that we need to hear as well. Today, we struggle with many of the same issues that afflicted the Corinthians, i.e., "problems of doctrine, discipline and vision," and, according to professor of history Garry Wills, "problems of class, of gender, of personalities." In the face of such problems, we need to find resolution. We need a song of reconciliation.

Today, this song is being sung in churches around the world. In Berlin, a congregation called Reconciliation Parish sits right next to a fragment of the Berlin Wall that once divided both the city and members of this congregation. Since the fall of the wall, the church has worked to bring former enemies into dialogue with one another -- working hard to resolve disputes between individuals.

Reconciliation Parish has hosted conversations between former members of the

East German Secret Police (Stasi) and their victims. The late Pastor Manfred Fischer found that "victims are keen to forgive, and willing." But first, there needs to be an honest and open word, such as "I am sorry. I acted in a wrong way."

Pastor Fischer knew that, in East Germany, people used to be punished for speaking openly, and they were still suffering from having spoken out -- they lost education and jobs. Admitting that these people were victims is very difficult for many who did wrong. Fischer saw this same problem with the World War II generation that did not want to discuss their history under Hitler.

[NOTE 5] But there can be no reconciliation -- with God or with other people -- without an honest and open word. Overcoming alienation and establishing new and peaceful relationships is best done through conversation, confession and forgiveness in a safe and hospitable Christian community -- one that's grounded in the reconciling work of God. Reconciliation always begins with what God has done through Christ, establishing a "new creation" (v. 17) in which Christ's love governs every perception and action.

At Saddleback Church in California, work is being done to resolve disputes between communities. A song of reconciliation was offered during a conversation between Paul Kagame, president of the Republic of Rwanda, and Yale theologian Miroslav Volf. They talked about the transformational power of reconciliation and how it reunited the people of Rwanda after its 1994 genocide.

President Kagame said that he believes that the role of the government is to embrace everyone, and "bring them together," while the role of the church is to be a voice to point out when the government is wrong. He admitted, however, that during the genocide the church and government "were almost one and the same," so the church could not distance itself from the action of the government.

Miroslav Volf, who lived through the Bosnian conflict, said loving one's enemies is the truly Christian response in such a situation. "To forgive is an act of power," Volf said, "When I forgive, I'm in charge. I'm releasing you from the wrong." Although the United States is not experiencing genocide, pastor Rick Warren said that stories of reconciliation are relevant because the country is hurting from division on so many issues. Promoting reconciliation is at the top of Warren's agenda, and both he and his church members are trying to do this work in their community and around the world. Every year, members of Saddleback participate in a Christian-Muslim picnic, building bridges of relationship. They partner with African-American congregations in the city of Compton, California. Bridges are being built with Hispanic pastors in Southern California, and work is being done to keep young people out of gangs and in school. In Rwanda, teams from Saddleback have partnered with church leaders, equipped pastors and worked on the issue of reconciliation. **[NOTE 6]**

I do not propose to tell anyone that working toward reconciliation is easy. Just as I refused to tell you a few weeks ago that forgiveness is easy. But whether it is easy or not it is clear that Scripture, the Word of God, calls us to forgiveness, grace and mercy.

God calls us through the power of the Holy Spirit to a ministry of reconciliation. I have known people who have been compassionate and forgiving, even under the most strenuous circumstances while undergoing the most horrific treatment.

Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana is someone like that. Arrested as an anti-apartheid activist, he endured excruciating physical torture at the hands of the South African police. His experience renewed his commitment to anti-apartheid work. He did not work out of thirst for revenge. He told me that, in the midst of his torture, he had an astonishing insight: "These are God's children, and they are losing their humanity. We have to help them recover it." It is a remarkable feat to be able to see past the inhumanity of the behavior and recognize the humanity of the person committing the atrocious acts. This is not weakness. This is heroic strength, the noblest strength of the human spirit. --Desmond and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*

(HarperOne, 2014), 34. **[NOTE 7]** Where do *you* see a dispute that needs to be resolved? With your spouse? With a family member? With a friend? With a fellow church member? With a group in the community? We need to sing a song of reconciliation today, because we are hurting from division -- as individuals, as a church, as a nation and as a world. Reconciliation happens when we speak open and honest words which, in turn, lead to new and peaceful relationships. Disputes are resolved when we offer and accept forgiveness based on the work that God has done in Christ. Reconciliation happens when we show each other love, mercy and a self-giving grace. This work can be done in our personal relationships, among groups in our congregation, in our increasingly-diverse communities, and in the world around us.

Reconciliation is a song that should be inescapable in the Christian church, impossible to avoid or ignore. So let's sing it together, keeping it simple and repeating it as frequently as we can. This is one of those things I am talking about right before the Confession of Sin in our liturgy on Sunday. Let God build it into your life! Let's Pray ... AMEN

Sermon Notes for "Song of Reconciliation"

based on 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

Given at Doster Community Church on August 21, 2022

- I. "Processing Fluency" is the phrase describing what happens when you can't get the words of a song out of your head. Paul uses this process to make reconciliation stick in our minds because it is vital to the Christian life.
- II. What exactly is reconciliation? The Greek Word it is a word drawn from the sphere of politics; it refers to dispute resolution. The Reconciliation Project sees reconciliation as a restoration of the recognition of humanity. Put simply, it means coming back to a place where people are seen as people instead of objects.
- III. The apostle Paul says that God "reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18). God has worked through Christ to resolve a dispute with us, repairing the relationship that had been broken by sin. The work of reconciliation has been started by God, and now Christians are challenged to offer a ministry of reconciliation, resolving disputes between individuals and communities.
- IV. We can offer a ministry of reconciliation, says Hays, using "practices that show unity, love, mercy, forgiveness and a self-giving grace that the world could not even dream of apart from Christ."
- V. But there can be no reconciliation -- with God or with other people -- without an honest and open word. Overcoming alienation and establishing new and peaceful relationships is best done through conversation, confession and forgiveness in a safe and hospitable Christian community.
- VI. Whether it is easy or not it is clear that Scripture, the Word of God, calls us to forgiveness, grace and mercy. God calls us through the power of the Holy Spirit to a ministry of reconciliation.
- VII. Reconciliation happens when we show each other love, mercy and a self-giving grace. This work can be done in our personal relationships, among groups in our congregation, in our increasingly-diverse communities, and in the world around us. What are you going to do about it?