

January 29, 2023 Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Matthew 18:15-22, Colossians 3:12-15

"Gerunds of the Church: Reconciling"

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If we have any Physics professors in the congregation today I am going to ask you to cover your ears for a moment while I take a few undue liberties with some scientific terms. Centrifugal and centripetal force.

If I had a washer tied to a string and swung that string in a circle over my head, the force that causes the washer to circle as far away from me as possible is centrifugal force. It is the force that directs something away from the axis of rotation, in this case my rotating hand. Centripetal force is the equal and opposite force that pushes an object toward the axis of rotation. This causes the washer to continue to stay within my orbit. In this case the string creates that effect.

So, why am I butchering my way through notions of centrifugal and centripetal force? Well, today is the second sermon in our series, on the gerunds of the church. We will be considering how reconciling is essential to us being the church together. I would suggest that centrifugal force is akin to our sinful behavior. It is the force that drives us apart from our God and from each other. And centripetal force is akin to grace, to the forgiveness offered to us by our God and the forgiveness we offer each other which pulls us all closer together.

But here is where that metaphor falls short. Centrifugal and centripetal forces are equal and opposite reactions to each

other. And this is certainly not the case in the forces of sin and grace. Grace is an overwhelmingly more powerful force in the universe and in our lives than sin could ever be. The trick, of course is our acceptance of that all-powerful grace.

In the church we are called to be all about centripetal force; about leaning into the grace bestowed upon us; about allowing ourselves to be drawn into the axis, which is our God. But there is oh so much centrifugal force in our lives. We are driven apart and away from our God and each other in so many different ways.

I believe the most powerful and common way is by our egos. To receive God's grace we need to fully acknowledge how deeply imperfect we are. Our egos can be a centrifugal force that drive us away from that truth and from God's grace. But sometimes it is not our ego that spins us away from the divine but our insecurities. We doubt that we are worthy of God's grace and thus we are afraid to accept that it is being offered to us. Insecurities become a centrifugal force. Sometimes the distractions of life spin us away from the divine. We are so overwhelmed by the challenge of getting through our days that accepting God's grace becomes a distant afterthought. Distraction can become a centrifugal force. Sometimes we are laid so low that despair can become a centrifugal force spinning us away from God.

The Good News for us, and I mean good news with a capital "G" and a capital "N," good news as in gospel, is that the centrifugal forces in our lives are no match for the centripetal force of God's grace. Even as we are seeking to pull ourselves away, or the events in our life may be pulling us away, from

God's redeeming grace, in every moment grace is pulling us toward the center, toward the divine.

Newton's third law of motion states that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. But this is not the case when it comes to our brokenness in competition with God's grace. It may feel at times as if centrifugal force, those things that are pulling us from the divine are even more powerful than the centripetal force of God's grace. Perhaps that is because in most cases the grace of God does not demonstrate itself in brute force and fireworks. It quietly goes about its work, gently but insistently tugging upon us; wooing us; working its way through all impediments; wearing down our resistance; welcoming us in one small step at a time; pulling us back toward the axis; reconciling us back to God.

As the church we are called to reflect God's reconciling action; to remind each other of the power and presence of God's reconciling grace. The centrifugal forces in our lives can be so obvious it is easy to lose sight of the centripetal force of God's grace. When we are too wrapped up in our own ego needs to recognize the grace we are being offered, we need to be reminding each other of the force of God's reconciling grace. When we are consumed by insecurity, or overwhelmed by life we need to be reminding each other of the force of God's reconciling grace.

Our relationship with the divine will often be mirrored in our relationship with others. When our lives are dominated by the centrifugal forces that propel us away from accepting God's reconciling grace we are likely failing to reconcile with others. The same centrifugal forces of ego, insecurity, and being overwhelmed by life can lead us into conflict with one

another. From major disagreements to minor grievances, we can be driven apart by centrifugal forces.

However, when we accept and welcome the centripetal force of God's reconciling grace we are much more attuned to offering forgiveness to each other; we are more likely to be drawn together into community; we are more ready to approach each other with humility; we are more prepared to be reconciled with one another.

As the church we are called to be a reconciling community. When we recognize the powerful gift we have received of God's grace we are drawn past what divides us and pulled in by the centripetal force of forgiving one another. As Jesus says in Matthew, seventy-seven times we are called to forgive. Sound like too many? How many times has God's grace forgiven you? In Colossians we are called to forgive as we have been forgiven by our God.

The reality of living together in community is that we will not all be best friends. We will not all like each other all of the time. I would love to think that I am so darn charming everyone will like me but I do know better. I am pretty sure David is the only one everyone likes all of the time. But in the church community our calling is not about liking everyone, it is about being reconciled with them that we may love them. And the only way to love everyone is to grow beyond the centrifugal forces that divide us.

We reconcile with each other not because of our personal preferences but because the centripetal force of God's grace is drawing us all to the same place. If we cannot reconcile with one another, we cannot all be drawn into the axis of our God. If two objects that are being pulled to the same place repel

each other, they cannot be pulled to their shared destination. When we are divided from one another, we are inevitably divided from the divine.

The centripetal force of God's grace is at work within us and among us every day. But centrifugal forces can slow its progress toward reconciliation; toward drawing us all into the divine. For the church to be the church we must let go of the centrifugal forces in our lives, the egos and insecurities, the grudges and divisions, and lean toward God's reconciling grace in the ways we turn toward God and toward each other.

In a societal culture that no longer values reconciliation we are called to demonstrate this behavior to our wider world. If we, the church, do not teach and demonstrate reconciliation, who will?

The good news is that force of God's grace will always eventually prevail. The addendum to that good news is that we never run out of opportunities to lean into that grace and be drawn into the center of our God together.

I end with these words from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Every act of forgiveness mends something broken in this fractured world. It is a step, however small, in the long, hard journey toward redemption."

Thanks be to God. Amen.