

2 Corinthians 5:18-19

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, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (For context, read 5:11-21.)

These two verses answer the question as to why reconciliation is a theological and Christian issue. It is theological because God (the "theo" part of theological) practices it. God reconciles with us through Christ. Then God assigns us as God's agents in reconciling the world to God, as we proclaim what God has done for us and for all people. The Christian message and ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted to us who follow Jesus.

Who do we, the church, need to reconcile with in order to grow more fully into Christ?

Use this recent news as a framework to discuss our question:

North Korean Leader Halts Nuclear Tests and Missile Launches

Last week, North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un announced, that his regime would be stopping nuclear tests and launches of intercontinental ballistic missiles. President Donald Trump has labeled this good news, and South Korea has called the surprise declaration meaningful progress.

Pyongyang made the announcement before the summit with South Korea is this past week. There are hopes that the summit may lead to an end to the state of war that has existed between the two countries for over 65 years. A meeting between Leader Kim and President Trump is tentatively scheduled for May.

The stoppage of the tests and launches, however, does not signal any willingness on North Korea's part to denuclearize. Kim has said that further tests are no longer needed since his country has completed its drive to have nuclear weapons. Last year, North Korea tested two long-range missile prototypes capable of hitting the continental United States with a nuclear warhead, and it also exploded its first hydrogen bomb.

Explaining the North's unwillingness to give up its nuclear weapons, an article in *The Atlantic* said, "From Kim's point of view, nuclear weapons constitute his only guarantee of survival."

As background, the article added:

North Korea saw what happened to Saddam Hussein, whose attempts to develop nuclear weapons were cut short by an Israeli air-force raid in 1981. It saw how things went in 1994, when Ukraine surrendered its Soviet-era nuclear heritage in exchange for "guarantees" from the United States, Britain, and Russia, to respect its territorial integrity. Above all, North Korea remembers the sorry fate of Muammar al-Qaddafi of Libya, the only dictator in history who agreed to surrender his half-baked nuclear program in exchange for economic benefits. This is why the Kim regime has spent 60-odd years building up its nuclear program.

Kim has said that ending the missile tests is aimed at pursuing economic growth in his country and developing a socialist economy. He also wants sanctions against his country removed.

Many observers believe that President Trump's promise to use armed force if the North Koreans did not agree to abandon their nuclear program was part of what changed Kim's position. *The Atlantic* explained, "For decades, North Korea has been certain that the United States would never strike first: Seoul, the capital of South Korea, the closest U.S. ally in the region, lies within range of North Korean heavy artillery. If the North retaliated, hundreds of guns would transform downtown Seoul into an inferno. Such a crisis would be followed by a war of immense destruction."

But, said *The Atlantic*, "Trump has altered this calculus. While his 'fire and fury' threat may have been a bluff, he has persuaded the Kim regime that it is dealing with a president who is willing to risk Seoul (along with the U.S.-South Korea alliance). A U.S. military strike, Kim has come to see, is no longer an impossibility."

Apparently, the U.S. president's threats also helped persuade China to support the toughest sanctions that country ever imposed on Pyongyang, increasing the price of gas, rice and other commodities, reducing oil imports by one-third, and banning more than 90 percent of the North's exports to United Nations countries.

Even if Kim doesn't denuclearize, it is to be hoped that his ending the testing and ceasing to bristle at the world will reduce the threat from North Korea and contribute to peaceable relations on the Korean peninsula, in the region and with the rest of the world.

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Joshua 22:33

The report pleased the Israelites; and the Israelites blessed God and spoke no more of making war against them, to destroy the land where the Reubenites and the Gadites were settled. (For context, read 22:10-34.)

This verse is a summary statement about the happy conclusion of a potential battle between two groups of Israelites (Perhaps not unlike the two nations of Korea in the current situation). Instead of a fight, a compromise was reached, and at that point, the narrator tells us that the Israelites "blessed God."

What does it mean for us to bless God? The Hebrew word translated by "bless" has the original meaning of to "bend the knee" or to "kneel." Blessing is characteristically something that assures well-being and re-energizes us. But some of our actions, such as behaving with hostility toward others, in effect "diminish" the God who calls us to love one another.

Thus, when we engage in peacemaking and reconciliation, we are directing our energy to God and, in effect, blessing God.

Questions: What behaviors of yours do you see as "blessing God"? Is it possible that a reduction in hostilities between the two Koreas will "bless" God? Why or why not?

Genesis 13:8

Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred." (For context, read 13:1-18.)

When the land they were sharing could no longer support the herds and flocks of both men Abram offers to sacrifice what appears to be best for him so that there will be no conflict between the two of them, going beyond compromise and offering Lot the best land.

It later turns out that God blesses Abram even on the poorer land, but Abram didn't know that that would happen at the time he was making the offer. Thus, Abram had to be prepared to come out of the arrangement as the loser.

Questions: When have you had to accept loss to keep the peace with someone? In the long view, was it good that you did so?

Matthew 5:9

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (For context, read 5:1-12.)

This statement from Jesus is a definitive declaration about the need for his followers to actively work at making peace, for it is by doing so that they "will be called children of God."

Question: The Greek word translated here as "blessed" means "fortunate," "happy," "well-off" or "in a privileged situation." Why do you think Jesus attached a word with such meanings to the activity of making peace?

Esther 4:14

Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this. (For context, read 4:1-17.)

Mordecai made this statement having learned of a plot against the Jews by a member of the king's court to persuade Esther to intervene on her people's behalf with the king -- a risky thing for a woman in that day to do.

Mordecai referred to Esther's placement as queen as perhaps having happened primarily to put her in a position to save her people's lives.

Esther's intercession was ultimately successful in convincing the king to squash the plot against the Jews and empower the Jews to fight back.

Questions: Given that our country is strongly divided over Mr. Trump as president, is it possible that despite whatever strengths and weaknesses he may have, his mode of operation is the only one that would work with the belligerent Kim Jong-un, especially since decades of efforts by more conventional America leaders have not succeeded?

Prayer for Peace (BCP p.815)

Eternal God, in whose perfect kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, no strength known but the strength of love: So mightily spread abroad your Spirit, that all peoples may be gathered under the banner of the Prince of Peace, as children of one Father; to whom be dominion and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*