FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

*“A Promise of Reconciliation”* 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

On January 17, 1993, one hundred years to the day, I was proud to be in the crowd of more than 12,000 people at Iolani Palace who had gathered to listen to the Rev. Paul Sherry as he spoke to representatives of the Hawaiian nation. I would like to read you a portion of the description of the day written by the Rev. Dr. Kaleo Patterson:

*After attending services at Kawaiahao Church, and processing to the grounds of Iolani Palace where thousands of people had gathered, the Apology to Na Kanaka Maoli was given by Dr. Paul Sherry, President, of the United Church of Christ on January 17, 1993*. [Later,] *Dr. Paul Sherry, Dr. Kaleo Patterson, and Dr. Haaheo Guanson,* [consecrated a] *newly constructed ahu – altar.  As the group of Hawaiian leaders gathered, the manuscript of the Apology was placed on the ahu being blessed by Parly Kanakaole. The ahu - altar was made of stones – pohaku, it was made of stone, that were brought from all the islands to commemorate the day, and the hope of unity.*

Unity—rather, a particular quality of unity wherein each person is confident that they are fully seen and respected by the other person or persons. That is what our church’s apology to the *Na Kanaka Maoli* was meant to achieve, and the gathering at Iolani Palace was a good start. Indeed, it was a *great* beginning.

Before January 17, 1993, the unity we practiced in the church did not include formally and deliberately acknowledging what had happened all those years ago, namely that prominent members of the *Safety Committee*, the group that overthrew Queen Liliuokalani, were also descendants from the first Christian missionaries—the very men and women who founded the churches in which some UCC congregations still worship. Members of the *Safety Committee* were also members in good standing in their local Congregationalist churches.

It is also sad that in the days and years that followed, the church did not speak out against the overthrow. Instead, the church of 1893 advised non-involvement, even while being very much involved with the leaders of the overthrow.

So, for one hundred years we practiced a different kind of unity. It was not justice filled. It did, however, keep the churches quiet and non-confrontational. And so, before 1993, very often our unity consisted of sitting beside Native Hawaiians in our churches without acknowledging that anything had ever happened. It was all ancient history, we told ourselves, and has nothing to do with present-day life, nothing to do with us.

Since that day in 1993, one of the things I hope we have all learned is that the history and the fate of Hawaii and all of its *Na Kanaka Maoli* was materially changed by the overthrow. What I hope we are able to concede is that on January 17, 1893, something good and important was seized by force, was stolen from one people and put into the hands, and the management, and put to work for the prosperity of another group of people.

In so doing, a whole race of people were disenfranchised *in their own land*. In the intervening years, the *Na Kanaka Maoli* and their culture would become pushed off to the side as being insignificant, irrelevant, even worthless. As for the people themselves, the *Na Kanaka Maoli,* as a people, found themselves more and more impoverished financially, but also educationally, spiritually, and in so many other ways in which a people who suffer such a loss can be.

Most of us in this Sanctuary know about this part of our history. If I am not too much mistaken, quite a few members of Nu’uanu Congregational Church played important parts in bringing this historic injustice to the consciousness of the national church. You were instrumental in getting our church to remember, to acknowledge, and to apologize. Later, you were also part of both the national church and our Hawaii Conference giving land and millions of dollars to the *Na Kanaka Maoli* in restitution.

It was an amazing thing to do! I hope you all remember that action with gladness. It was not only an act of justice, it was an act of hope, too, for the *Na Kanaka Maoli*, but also for each and every one of us, for all non-Hawaiians too.

What I would especially like to say about this episode in our history is that it was a moment when our church—the UCC, but *also HCUCC, and NCC*—it was a moment when we truly lived up to our ideals, and to the lesson Paul was trying to convey to the church in Corinth in the passage we just heard. In that moment, on that day, we were truly “ambassadors of Christ.” We had received the “ministry of reconciliation,” and we had taken it seriously.

What it is also important for us to remember is that this all-important ministry is one of the hardest endeavors any of us will ever participate in. One of the reasons I say that is because it has been thirty-one years since that brave and courageous start on the grounds of Iolani Palace…it was a start, meaning, we have not yet achieved the reconciliation we have all hoped for and wanted. However, the good news is that during the last two years, a new group of people have come together to work on our hoped-for reconciliation. The group is part of our HCUCC’s Justice & Witness Team.

Why is it taking so long? I do not know the particulars. However, I do not believe it always has to take this long. Unfortunately, part of the problem is that of “healing.” For reconciliation to happen the injured party has to experience relief, they have to heal, and as we are all aware: healing works itself out on its own schedule.

Those who were injured must feel that the party who caused the injury understands and truly *sees* the harm that has been suffered. So, part of reconciliation is going to always include the willingness of all of the one group to offer the truth of what and how they have suffered to the other, and it requires the people who caused the injury to listen.

We are to listen and to hear with our hearts and spirits. We are to listen to the truth of people—groups and individuals—whose needs and desires have been, for whatever reason, overlooked, ignored, or belittled.

We are to listen and grieve with the injured. We are to listen because that is an important way we may offer care, this is how we will help others toward wholeness. This is how we may, together, work towards forgiveness. This is how we will build new connections with others—by listening and by showing our humanity as it has been renewed through Christ.

Indeed, Paul writes that everyone who is in Christ is a “new creation.” It is from our new life in Christ—his strength, his courage, his understanding of our suffering, and his desire to bring an end to our suffering and sin—this is the new foundation from which we can build new relationships with each other.

Moreover, we are not the only ones who have been made new through Christ’s love. For love of the whole world, Christ reconciled all of us to God through his life, his suffering, his death, and his resurrection.

Thus, all of us who profess Christ as our Savior are called upon to see our lives, and the lives of all people, as having been made new—and this is where the good news about our ministry of reconciliation lies. It is in the important fact that our success in this ministry will not depend on our own strength or achievement.

It will come as we commit ourselves and *re*commit, and *re*commit ourselves again and again, to seeing Christ and the new creation he has made in the lives of the all people around us—especially the people with whom our relationship is damaged. We become the “righteousness of God” through an encounter with Christ in the other—That is, in our family and friends, but also in those whom we find difficult, those with whom we are at odds.

This is hard work, but it is necessary. One man, Brother Roger founder of the Taizé community in France, put it this way: “*Never resign yourself to the scandal of the separation of Christians, all who so readily confess love for their neighbor, and yet remain divided. Be consumed with burning zeal for the unity of the Body of Christ.*”

For Brother Roger, and for others like the late Desmond Tutu, Mother Theresa, and the many who worked to bring Rev. Paul Sherry to Iolani Palace in 1993, the divisions among us are what continues to nail Jesus back onto the cross, and for all those people I named, this is a continuous scandal.

I would like to close this sermon today with a much more recent example of one person seeing a new creation—even in a situation that was filled with political posturing, and outright ugliness of mind and spirit. I am, of course, speaking of the confirmation hearing for Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson. It is a sad truth that since the 1980’s confirming a new judge to the Supreme Court has become a contest about who can throw the most mud—both sides do it.

This past Wednesday, as it all got to a fevered pitch, one speaker stood out. Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey. In the midst of the mud and the ugliness, this is part of what he said: *“I’m not letting anybody in the Senate steal my joy...Don’t worry, my sister. Don’t worry. God has got you. How do I know that? Because you’re here and I know what it’s taken for you to sit in that seat.”*

Sen. Booker is able to see a new creation God was building in Judge Jackson, and he formally put everyone on notice that he was *not* going to let that shining new creation slip from his view. He was not going to relinquish his hope—and I fervently pray that we will not either.

You see *we*—you and I and all who love and follow Christ—*we* are his ambassadors. We are the ones who can and *must* look for God’s new creation—even amidst the mud and ugliness of current events—because that is where we will find and build the new life God has given us. This is our vocation, our mission, and our journey: to live out the promise of reconciliation, to *not* let anyone steal our joy.

Rather, may God bless us and give us the will and the faith so that we are never too tired or discouraged, but keep our mission and ministry ever before us so that the future God has planned for us may break into the world. May this be so. Amen.