

Hunger for Reconciliation
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Steven M Conger

(Philippians 3:4b-14 NRSV) If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: {5} circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; {6} as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. {7} Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. {8} More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ {9} and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. {10} I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, {11} if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. {12} Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. {13} Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, {14} I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

There is a story of an American who paid a visit to the renowned Polish rabbi Hofetz Chaim.

The tourist was astonished to see that the rabbi's home was but a simple, single room. Beside many books, the only furnishings were a table and bench.

"Rabbi," asked the American, "where is all your furniture?"

To which Chaim replied, "And where is yours?"

"Mine?" asked the tourist with a puzzled tone. "I'm just a visitor here. I'm only passing through."

"So am I," answered the rabbi, "So am I."

This morning we continue our Lenten theme of Hunger by talking about our HUNGER FOR RECONCILIATION.

Throughout the Bible there are really two understandings of reconciliation.

The first is reconciliation with God.

The Greek word for reconciliation is *katallage*; it essentially denotes the idea of *being 'restored to God'*. It is also referred to as *'atonement'*, which essentially has to do with becoming one with God (*at-one-ment*).

It happened to a rural Lake County, South Dakota, Lutheran church in August of 2000.

Vandals attacked St. Peter Lutheran Church building with vengeance –
breaking windows,
smashing light fixtures,
flipping over the baptismal font,
slashing a large "Jesus the Good Shepherd" painting,
scribbling, and carving obscenities into the sanctuary walls and fixtures.

The golden altar cross had been swung like a bat to gouge pews and walls.

In the basement, kitchen dishes were broken and objects flung hither and yon.

The vandals caused more than \$40,000 worth of damage to the interior of the congregation's building.

The congregation was forced to hold services outside the following Sunday.

"There were many tears. Everyone was so devastated and shocked that someone could do this to a church," recalls Susan Janssen, congregational vice-president. "No one could believe how terrible it was."

Three months after the vandalism took place, police arrested two area teenagers, ages sixteen and nineteen, who confessed to the crime. When the boys, let out of jail on bond, returned to apologize publicly to the congregation before serving their sentences, they were shocked to be received with love and forgiveness.

As the nineteen-year-old left the lectern to return to his seat, a member greeted him and hugged him. Others stood to shake his hand and, after the service, members surrounded the two boys, saying they forgave them.

The act of forgiveness shocked the two families so much that they joined the church, and the church in turn has experienced a revival. Worship attendance has tripled in two years and membership in this 117-year-old declining country church is growing.

"We had been separated from organized religion since our oldest daughter died of cancer," said the father of one of the boys. "We rejected the whole religion thing. This event has pulled us back into the church."

Pastor Terry Knudson likens the dramatic episode at St. Peter to the Old Testament story of Joseph. "The vandalism was one of our darkest moments," he says. "God can find a way to bring good from evil."

The central story of the Bible is God's hunger to be reconciled with us.

But remember -- God hasn't broken off the relationship -- we have!

God wants to be in a relationship with each of us. But wants us also to recognize our role in helping in that reconciliation.

Adele Kipp, the treasurer of St. Peter's church, made this interesting comment:
"We know the pain the boys and their families are feeling. We felt it was our responsibility not only to forgive them, but also to help them put their lives back together. Absolution is what churches are for."

The second Biblical understanding is reconciliation with our brother or sister; our need to have our broken relationships with each other restored.

Charlie Croker was proud of his entire physique:
his massive neck,
his broad shoulders,
his prodigious forearms
. . . but above all, he was proud of his back.

His employees called him Cap'm Charlie, after a legendary fishing-boat captain from a hundred years ago with the same name, a sort of Pecos Bill figure with curly blond hair who had accomplished daring feats of strength.

There was even a song about him, which some of the old folks knew by heart. It went: "Charlie Croker was a man in full. He had a back like a Jersey bull Charlie Croker! Charlie Croker! Charlie Croker!"

Whether or not such a figure ever existed, Charlie had never been able to find out.

But he loved the idea, and he often said to himself what he was saying to himself at this moment: "Yes, I got a back like a Jersey bull!" (Tom Wolfe, [A Man in Full](#))

Charlie Croker, the hero of Tom Wolfe's best-selling novel, appears at first glance to be "a man in full."

Back in the late 1950s, when Georgia Tech was a national football power, he had been not only a star running back but also a linebacker, one of the last players on any major football team to play both offense and defense, earning him the nickname of the "Sixty-Minute Man."

Now in the 1990s, he is a major Atlanta real-estate developer:
with a 40-story development called Croker Concourse,
a corporation by the name of Croker Global,
a 29,000-acre farm called Turpmtine
and a Gulfstream Five private jet.

Wolfe writes: He has "the power to charm men and the manic drive to bend their wills into saying yes to projects they didn't want, didn't need, and never thought about before."

What Charlie Croker has is "manhood," it is as simple as that.

But early in the book, Charlie runs into trouble.

His Croker Concourse development is sitting too far outside Atlanta, 60 percent empty, hemorrhaging money.

Charlie's bank calls him in for a humiliating meeting, and demands that he start paying back the \$515 million he has borrowed from them.

Croker Global is in trouble because it has failed to come up with \$36 million in scheduled interest payments and a scheduled \$60 million repayment of principal.

This is serious money, so the bank berates Charlie and demands that he sell, sell, sell -- sell his cars, sell his planes, sell his horses, sell his farm!

Insisting on getting its money back, the bank throws Charlie Croker into the struggle of his life.

Of course, Cap'm Charlie is not the first "man in full" to find himself in a jam.

Years before Tom Wolfe wrote his bodacious novel, another book managed to portray the hectic complexities of life, and capture the textures and rhythms of a particular group of people.

This old tome matches Wolfe's work in telling according to Herbert Kupferberg writing in Parade Magazine:

a "gloriously readable story about a group of mostly shameless characters whose grasping ambitions and shaky ethics reflect both the excitement and the excesses of . . . life."

It is, of course, the Bible

In the book of Genesis, there exists a character who is every bit the testosterone terrorist that Charlie Croker is, a man who also finds that his personal control over life is really rather limited.

His name is Jacob, and he is the trickster who first outwits his elder brother Esau, getting him to sell his birthright for a pot of stew, and then disguises himself as Esau in order to receive his father's blessing.

Would Jacob have blamed Charlie Croker for considering the use of any means to save his tottering real estate empire?

No, probably not.

But in time, Jacob's manic manipulations catch up with him, just as Cap'm Charlie's do.

Fearing his brother Esau, who has threatened to kill him and is now coming to meet him with 400 men, Jacob tries to get the situation in hand by coming up with an interesting plan.

He divides his camp in half and puts together a set of impressive gifts for his brother, hoping that a bribe will placate him.

Greatly afraid and distressed, he prays that God will deliver him from Esau, but just before their fateful meeting, Jacob finds himself engaged in a supernatural struggle.

He plunges into a brawl with a stranger at Peniel, and the two of them go full-tilt until daybreak.

(Genesis 32:24-30 NRSV) Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. {25} When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. {26} Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." {27} So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." {28} Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." {29} Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. {30} So Jacob called the

place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

It turns out to be an encounter with the divine, one that allows Jacob to see God "face to face" (v. 30), a wrestling match that knocks his hip out of joint, but gives him a new name and makes him -- for the first time -- a Man in Full.

What does such a struggle teach us about being a whole human being . . . fully human . . . a man or woman in full?

Deirdre Donahue wrote in USA Today that people in the 21st century and beyond will be reading A Man in Full

"to understand what crazed folks we Americans were as the millennium approached. Wolfe has our number in all matters -- sexual, racial, political and economical".

But we also will be reading the Bible.

And taken together these are two big books that "have our number in all matters" and teach us a great deal about what it means to be a whole human being.

You could argue that ...

To be a full human being is to be persistent.

Jacob wrestles with the stranger till daybreak, and won't let him go until he receives a blessing.

He uses his strength and determination to get the job done, just as millions of us do every day.

Yet, mere persistence is not the complete answer to being a full human being.

Charlie Croker was all that and more -- and miserable!

Persistence is an admirable quality that can often be taken to a bad extreme.

Both Jacob and Charlie fell victim to the mentality that whispered: "I am going to win; they are going to lose."

Or we might say that ...

To be a full human being is to be hopeful.

Jacob trusts the promises of God and asks for a blessing, even when his situation calls for despair.

He believes that he'll find a way through his predicament, just like Charlie Croker, who remains hopeful even when his expansionist ambitions and outsize ego hit hard against the reality of his staggering load of debt.

In his darkest hour, he attempts to charm a fitness center tycoon in need of 360,000 square feet of prime office space to create a new corporate headquarters.

Charlie knows that with any luck, such a deal would mean seven floors and more than \$10 million a year in lease income at Croker Concourse, a financial and public relations coup that would impress everyone at the bank and help to pull him out of bankruptcy.

In the darkness before the dawn, neither Jacob nor Charlie loses hope.

Unfortunately, hope alone is not the answer to wholeness either.

Hope can often be nothing more than naked and desperate ambition disguised as dreams.

Both Jacob and Charlie were crazed by hope, and paralyzed by the fear that what they hoped for couldn't be achieved.

We get closer to the truth of what it means to be fully human when we understand that ...

To be a full human being is to have some brokenness.

Jacob has a dislocated hip, and Charlie has a banged-up right knee from his days as the Sixty-Minute Man.

Tom Wolfe tells us that the

"egotism of the male of the species is such that he is embarrassed to let another male get an eyeful of his infirmities."

Wolfe is right, isn't he?

Charlie contorts himself to get out of his car without assistance, even though his knee is killing him. When he succeeds after much time and effort, he insists that it wasn't age or plain old arthritis that had done this to his 60-year-old knee. "It was football, which qualified as an honorable wound of war".

Of course, our brokenness includes more than physical pain:

As the novel describes so well,
also shattered and suffering is our society,
even in the best of times.

Contemporary America includes:
networks of illegal immigrants across the continent,
life behind bars,
shady real-estate syndicates,
cast-off first wives of the corporate elite,
and the racially charged politics of college sports.

A Man in Full sees that all this is part of the real world around us, and it cannot be ignored or dismissed as insignificant.

True wisdom comes more from pain and failure than from joy and success.

To be a full human being is to be open to reconciliation.

When Jacob encounters Esau, he is shocked by his brother's forgiving embrace.

While it wouldn't be fair to reveal the ending, Charlie Croker comes through, and his deliverance includes an equally surprising turn of events, one that involves a press conference designed to alleviate racial tensions, and the discovery of an ancient book of wisdom.

After years of finding strength in "his money, his reputation, his success in worldly affairs", Charlie realizes that the one true source of strength is available elsewhere.

For each of us, reconciliation with God, with ourselves, and with others is the key to a life that is satisfying, strong, healthy and whole.

Jacob is not exaggerating when he looks at his brother at their reunion and says, "truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God" (33:10).

Are you a man in full?

A woman who is fully human?

If you want to be, you'll have to become as persistent as Charlie Croker, determined to find deliverance for his crumbling corporate empire.

You'll have to hold on to hope, even as you join Jacob in striving day and night with God and with humans.

You'll have to acknowledge pain and brokenness, whether it's in your knee or in your neighborhood.

And you'll have to be open to reconciliation -- open to the humbling restoration of relationships with God, with others, and with your own true self.

Only then will you move beyond being a Sixty-Minute Man, a manic manipulator -- or any other category that has kept you half-empty, unhealthy and heartbroken.

Only then will you know what it means to be a man or a woman "in full."