

My wife Clare Ann and I teach Bahasa Inggris Teologis in Duta Wacana's Pasca Sarjana program this semester. At the first class we wanted to be clear about the goals of the class, and what was expected of the students. It was very simple: to start your skripsi you must first pass the Bahasa Inggris Teologis test. This class, we said, is to help you prepare for that test. The test is only reading comprehension. You do not need to speak English, just read and understand it. You do not need to write English, just read and understand it. You do not need to please us, you need to pass the test. You do not need to impress the other students, you need to pass the test. Anything we do in class which helps you pass the test is good. Anything we do which does not help is bad. We do not want any stumbling blocks to keep you from passing the test.

Stumbling blocks. Batu penarung. That is a funny idiom. A stumbling block is something which catches your foot and makes you stumble or fall - jatuh. Sometimes there really is something which catches your foot. Streets and sidewalks here have many stumbling blocks. But usually a stumbling block is not physical. Words can be stumbling blocks. Attitudes can be stumbling blocks. Relationships can be stumbling blocks.

In his second letter to the church at Corinth the Apostle Paul was trying to explain his goals, and describe goals Christians should have. Just like our class, the goal Paul set was simple: be reconciled to God - punyalah rekonsiliasi dengan Allah, and help others to be reconciled as well. Jesus came to reconcile people to God, and Jesus gave us the message of reconciliation to share with everyone.

That is pretty simple. If what we are doing is spreading Christ's message of reconciliation, our work is good. If what we do creates stumbling blocks that cause people to fall instead of receive the message, what we are doing is bad.

Reconciliation is a big word. What do we really mean by "the message of reconciliation?" That's rekonsiliasi in Bahasa Indonesia, and means the same thing. The word "conciliation" means the process of bringing two people or things together, to help them fit together. To reconcile means to fit together again two people or things that have come apart. It is similar to mencocokkan, but mencocokkan has the feeling of forcing things to fit together, while reconciliation has the feeling of inviting things to fit together.

Here is Paul's description: people had been separated from God by sin. A holy God cannot be close to sinners. There must be distance between them. God did not want this distance. God wanted to be reconciled with human beings. To be close again. As I have learned working with victims and offenders, to reconcile there must be restitution. The sin must be paid for. But the price of sin was high - death. Human beings could not pay the price. It was too high. So God paid it by coming to live as a human being in Jesus, and to die on the cross as a sacrifice for sin. The restitution has been paid. Now human beings and God can be close - be reconciled.

The message of reconciliation has two parts. The first part is what I described. God paying the price for sin so that people and God could be close again. The other part is that people who hate each other separate themselves from one another. You cannot separate yourself from other people and be close to God. Because God is close to those people. So to hate other people is to separate yourself from God. We must be reconciled to other people to get the benefit of our reconciliation with God through Jesus. It means loving our neighbors and loving our enemies.

So Jesus came to reconcile people to God, and gave his followers the message of reconciliation. We are to help people understand what God did for them through Jesus, and we are to help people be reconciled with each other so that they can have the closeness to God that God desires. The message is simple. It is important that we not put stumbling blocks in the path that keep people from receiving it.

I've been a Christian for a long time. I have seen Christians do many things, thinking they were following God's plan. I am sorry to say that sometimes Christians are mostly busy building stumbling blocks that keep people from receiving Jesus' message of reconciliation. I think this happens when Christians forget what the goal is. I have built stumbling blocks for myself and others when I forgot the goal.

The Apostle Paul was very concerned about one big stumbling block that many teachers of religion were building. Money. In Paul's time there were many independent religious teachers. They would travel from place to place selling their services. This included Christian teachers. Paul was quick to tell Christians that they should support their teachers. It wasn't fair for a church to take someone's time and give nothing back. But he also said it was wrong for an evangelist to demand payment for the good news. That is a stumbling block.

So Paul worked at his trade everywhere he went. He was a tentmaker. So he would sew tents for people and they would pay him. He did not want to ask people to pay for the good news. It had been given to him for free, and he wanted to give it away for free. Once a person received the message and became a Christian, they had the responsibility to support their teachers.

It is the same today. A church that talks about giving money all the time makes people feel unwelcome. That's a stumbling block to receiving the message of reconciliation. But a church also has to tell its people how well they are supporting the church. Christians must be careful to be responsible about money, while not building stumbling blocks.

There are ways of behaving that create stumbling blocks. Actions that are inconsistent with the message of reconciliation. Paul gives us a list of things. He did not want his behavior to be a stumbling block. So he worked hard both at his trade of tentmaking, and as a teacher. He was not lazy. He accepted abuse. When people called him names or beat him, he accepted it. He did not try to get revenge. All that mattered was the message of reconciliation. Jesus died so that we can live as children of God. No message is more important. No revenge is as important. What people thought of Paul was not as important. He stayed focused on the goal.

Each Christian fellowship is a little different. Some are very different. I preached at JOY fellowship a few weeks ago. It is something like this fellowship, but it is different too. Each group, according to what Paul says, is supposed to figure out how best to get the message of reconciliation to people. Each group of Christians has a certain set of abilities and interests. It is important for each church or fellowship to have a style that works for them, so that they can be successful in giving the message of reconciliation to people. If all churches were the same, then the only people who could receive the message are those who can receive it in that one way.

Paul lists many things which can be important in preventing stumbling blocks. After all, believers read the Bible, but other people read believers. The only way for most people to learn to know Jesus is to watch his followers. So if we are doing something which is inconsistent with the message of reconciliation, we have created a stumbling block. People stumble over us, and don't reach the message.

Paul lists several hardships he has accepted, and then lists some positive behaviors: purity, understanding, patience, kindness, sincere love, truthful speech and other things. Each of these things, if not practiced, can be a stumbling block. Something that keeps people away from the message of reconciliation.

Perhaps the biggest stumbling blocks are created by Christians who do not realize that there are two parts to the message of reconciliation. Christians all seem to get the first part, that Jesus died to reconcile us to God. But many Christians don't see why they should be concerned about reconciling people to each other.

One way to visualize the need for reconciling people to each other is to draw three circles that overlap with each other. This is called a Venn diagram. The three circles are God, me and others. Where all three circles overlap, that means where our relationship with God and with other people is good, we find shalom, the wholeness that God intended for us. Now try to push away one circle, the one called others. As you push it away, the overlapping place called shalom disappears. When we try to push other people away, the peace and wholeness God has for us goes away too. Or, as Jesus says, you cannot love God and hate your brother or sister. Your saudara.

As Jesus says in Matthew: the great commandment is to love God. The second is to love your neighbor. We find out in that same place that our neighbor specifically includes our enemies.

Many of you know that my professional work is in peace and reconciliation. My office is in the Center for Study and Promotion of Peace at Duta Wacana. I like very much being able to teach and train people in a subject that not only is of interest to everyone, but is central to the gospel. Reconciliation is a big word. Maybe some concrete examples can help us look at what it might mean here in Indonesia.

I spent the last two weeks at Kaliurang doing three trainings on the theme "Empowering for Community Reconciliation." In fact I came directly from the last training to be here. So I have

worked the last two weeks to prepare about 80 Indonesians to be reconcilers in their communities. So what does reconciliation look like?

In the international edition of Newsweek a week ago there were two stories on the push for independence in Aceh and Papua Barat. Some would say that reconciliation is needed between the people of those provinces and the government of Indonesia. When I was in Papua we were discussing the divisions in cities there. Everyone agreed that merdeka was good, but when it came to deciding who would be in charge after merdeka there was some disagreement. Reconciliation within those communities will be needed

We flew into the interior of the Bird's Head of Papua and visited villages. We discovered that villages were fighting over the use of black magic to harm people. Generally speaking, these villagers did not believe in death by natural causes. If someone died, it was because a neighboring tribe used black magic to cause the death, and that demanded revenge. Maybe some reconciliation is needed there.

I have also talked to people about problems in their families. People not talking to each other, or even suffering quietly and alone because of bad relationships.

Reconciliation is a big word. When I teach and train on the subject, people usually want to apply the principles of reconciliation to big problems far away. Here on Java people usually want to talk about Papua or Aceh. In Papua people want to talk about Ambon. It seems like no one wants to talk about reconciliation here. Now, I think we are all the same in this way. It feels good to talk about someone else needing reconciliation. The farther away they are and the more different they are from us the better. It makes us nervous to talk about reconciliation if it means us changing.

That's why I never let my classes talk about far away places before we have applied the principles at home, in class, at work. I tell people that a person cannot understand how reconciliation is possible in Ambon until you learn how to do reconciliation in your house. Then the application to Ambon is obvious.

So let me give you some principles to use for reconciliation at home, at work or at school. They're easy to remember. As we practice them we are practicing the ministry of reconciliation.

First, we must have a commitment to be constructive. Tekad untuk membangun. Psychologists call that unconditional positive regard. Penerimaan tanpa syarat. Christians call it agape, kasih. Self-giving love that demands nothing from the other person.

Then when someone hurts us or we hurt them, we do three things with them. 1. Acknowledge the injustice. Mengakui adanya luka hati. We don't have to agree that it was an injustice, we just have to acknowledge that it was experienced that way. 2. Make things as right as possible now. Menyeimbangkan kembali. If I break your cd player, saying I am sorry is not enough. I must also fix the machine. 3. Be clear about future intentions. Melihat jelas ke masa depan. When we do

these three things trust can begin to grow again. That is how reconciliation works on a personal level.

You may have noticed that these three steps sound a lot like confession, repentance and atonement. Reconciliation to God and to other people looks a lot alike.

These same principles work on bigger problems among people too. Community conflict, while it is more complicated, is basically the same as conflict between two of us. Designing a reconciliation process for a community requires figuring out how to do those same three things for a large number of people and groups.

God gave us the ministry of reconciliation. God did not tell us exactly how to do it, but the principles of love for God and neighbor are a good beginning. If we want the shalom God intended for us we need to work at our relationships with God and with other people.

There are efforts going on right now to use the reconciliation principles I described to work on community conflicts in Indonesia. There is a group of Muslims and Christians from Yogya working with people on Ambon to offer opportunities for reconciliation. Two similar efforts led by church groups are underway in Papua. Here in Yogya there is active work going on among Christians and Muslims to avoid the problems we see elsewhere.

The ministry of reconciliation is not limited to personal relationships. It applies to all people everywhere. Our failure to work at this ministry can be a major stumbling block for those who might otherwise receive the good news. When Christians do not take the need for reconciliation among people seriously it is difficult to preach reconciliation with God through Jesus.

But when we actively work toward the reconciliation of people with each other, our message of reconciliation with God makes sense. People can see that our faith makes a difference, and they may even want that difference for themselves.

The ministry of reconciliation is ours to pick up, or to leave behind as a stumbling block to those who need the good news. May we have the faith and the courage to be part of this ministry of reconciliation.

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