

## A Ministry of Reconciliation

We've arrived this morning at the final installment of series of sermons I began the week after Easter. Although I've never given this series a formal title, if I had to choose one at this late date I'd call it something like, "The Character of a Witness." My basic premise throughout these sermons has been this: We live at a time and place in history when it seems like the message about Jesus is losing its audience. And order for that world-changing message to get a hearing in this so-called post-modern and post-Christian time, our *character* as his followers matters more than ever. And so, starting with Paul's reflections on his own character in 2 Corinthians, we've spoken about being credible witnesses, faithful witnesses, humble witnesses, and hopeful witnesses.

Today's reading contains some of the most familiar words from 2 Corinthians – and it will allow us to sum up all that we've been seeing these past few weeks. I'd like to work our way through it a little bit more systematically than I've been doing—just basically moving through it from beginning to end.

Paul begins in verse 16, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view." Paul is saying that knowing Christ has changed his way of looking at people. The key to understanding what he means by this comes from the second part of the sentence ... "even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way."

In saying this Paul is looking back on his own journey to faith, and to the dramatic change that occurred in his life when he was confronted by a vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Up until that time, he had looked at Jesus from a particular point of view. And what he saw was someone who couldn't possibly have been the Messiah. Because, like most Jewish people in his time, he has a particular idea of what the Messiah was supposed to do. The Messiah was supposed to conquer the enemies of God, beginning with the Romans. He was supposed to restore the proper worship of God in the Temple. And he was to reign on the throne of David in Jerusalem. But instead Jesus was crucified – he died a humiliating death. As Paul saw it he had died abandoned and cursed by God.

But when Paul had his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road, it changed his way of looking at him. It led him to search the Scriptures and come to a whole new perspective on why Jesus died. As he puts it at the end of the reading, on the cross, “[f]or our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” The very thing Paul thought disqualified Jesus from being the Messiah actually ended up being the key to God's plan. He had to learn to set aside his false assumptions about Jesus.

And in the same way he has learned not to let his assumptions and presuppositions color the way he looks at anyone. That's what he means when he says that he no longer looks at anyone from a merely human point of view.

He has learned not to put people into categories and boxes. As he writes in Galatians,

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27-28 NRSV)

This is also essential to our ability to be witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. We also need to look beyond the categories we put people in—and all the assumptions that come with doing that. We may think that we've outgrown it—but then we read the news for a few days. We see a story about two young Native American men on a college tour—and how a mother in the tour group called the campus police because they “made her nervous.” Or we hear about a graduate at student at Yale who fell asleep while studying in a lounge in her own dormitory—and how another student called the police on her, apparently assuming that she couldn't have belonged there. We hear talk people talk about “implicit bias”, and we may be tempted to write it off as so much political correctness. But I think Paul might call it, “regarding people from a human point of view”—literally “according to the flesh.”

The alternative is to see people the way God sees them—to see each person as someone created in the image of God and bearing the image of God. And despite anything that anyone has done, to see all people as within the reach of God's love, to see every individual as redeemable, to see every person has having a place in God's plan.

I think we stumble over this sometimes because as soon as someone says it our minds immediately gravitate to the most extreme cases. We start speculating about Hitler, or Osama bin Laden, or serial killers. But by making it about those extreme cases, we can excuse ourselves for quietly and unconsciously declaring other people beyond the reach of God's grace.

Our ability to share the good news about Jesus, and for people to welcome us as his messengers, depends on our ability to see everyone the way God does—to see each person's potential to be made new in Christ. This is what really drives Paul. Continuing with verse 17, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

Literally Paul just writes, "If anyone is in Christ – new creation!" By leaving it open-ended like this, he is communicating that this new creation has more than one dimension. On one level it is personal. Anyone who receives the good news of Christ by faith is given the gift of a new beginning. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, God doesn't hold any of the old stuff against us but welcomes us, and runs down the road to meet us, and even celebrates our homecoming!

But that new creation is more than personal. Our re-creation in Christ is just one piece of God's plan for the entire world. He says that "in Christ God was reconciling *the world* to himself." And so as people who are "in Christ" we are swept up into God's new creation, into the new heaven and new earth

envisioned in the book of Revelation—into what Jesus called the kingdom of God. This is not a political state with a capital in Jerusalem—as Paul once mistakenly believed—but an entirely new world order governed according to gracious purposes of God.

The word Paul uses for this all is reconciliation. Often times—even in Paul's writings—Scripture and our theological traditions speak of God's saving work in very legal terms, but reconciliation is a very relational word. Through Christ God has restored the relationship between God and humanity, which is broken when each of us takes God's good gift of life and squanders it like the prodigal son. But God took the initiative to restore that relationship—the one who was wronged stepped forward to make things right and to make all things new.

This is the good news we have to share. And Paul says that he sees himself an “ambassador” of Christ. He sees himself as God's peace envoy bringing the message of reconciliation everywhere he goes. And by extension that's what we are, too.

But reconciliation may seem like a very abstract thing to many people—even though need for it might be right before their eyes. So how are people to understand it and appreciate it? We can find an important clue in the end of the reading. Paul writes, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” N.T. Wright, suggests—and think he's right—that this is better translated like this, “that in him

we might embody God's faithfulness" to the promises he made to his people going all the way back to Abraham.

The important word here is "embody." God has chosen to work in the world through the church so that we can embody the reality and power of God's reconciling love. Because people can understand spiritual realities when they see them fleshed out. That's why Jesus took on human flesh. It's why he taught in parables—and why the parable of the prodigal son is so powerful. By seeing such a compelling picture of what reconciliation looks like between human beings, we can begin to grasp God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ.

And so God has placed his church—the community of believers—in the world to embody reconciliation. He has put us here to model it, and as we do that we point those around us to the power of God's love, and we give the world a foretaste of God's new creation. Reconciliation is hard spiritual and relational work. We shy away from it a good deal of the time. We don't like to admit that we've done wrong, or we would rather bear undeserved suffering than seek to heal a broken relationship. But we have been placed here to be God's peace envoys—his ministers of reconciliation.

In 1967, Presbyterians in the United States took what was seen at the time as bold and controversial step. For as long as there were Presbyterians in America, if you wanted to know what Presbyterians believed there was one definitive source to turn to, the Westminster Confession of Faith, written in England in the 1640s. But in the 1960s, Presbyterians decided there was a need

for a new Presbyterian statement of faith—not to replace Westminster, but to speak about our faith in way that spoke to the issues facing Christians in the mid-twentieth century.

The unifying theme of the Confession of 1967 is reconciliation. In the preface, the writers said, “Our generation stands in peculiar need of reconciliation in Christ.” And the confession begins with speaking, as Paul does, about God’s reconciling work in Jesus—and then it goes on to areas in which the church is especially called to be God’s agent of reconciliation in today’s world. It speaks of racial discrimination, conflict among nations, poverty and economic injustice, and anarchy in sexual and family relationships. Fifty years later these themes are still as urgent as they were in 1967.

To be witnesses to the power of the resurrection is to embody all the things we have spoken of these past weeks—trustworthiness, faithfulness, humility, hope, and reconciliation. As we live as God’s new creations in Jesus Christ, as we embody of reality of the kingdom of God, we can have faith that God will use us to be his peace envoys, to a generation that stands in peculiar need of reconciliation in Christ. Amen.

*Rev. David Spaulding  
First Presbyterian Church, Dixon  
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