

“Ambassadors for Christ”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 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. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The film “Green Book” received the Oscar this year for best picture. I would also highly recommend it. This movie is based on true events of the life of Dr. Don Shirley and Frank Vallelonga or his nickname, “Tony The Lip”. Don Shirley was a famous pianist and an African American. He wants to hire Tony, who is a White Caucasian, to be his driver and bodyguard while touring in the Midwest and the Deep South in 1962. As the movie begins, we soon find out that Tony is not very comfortable with being around African Americans. It is like oil and water, which do not mix! But, Tony accepts the job because he finds himself unemployed. As the story unfolds, the two men are able to move past their differences and see each other for who they are and the gifts they have to offer. One would ask, “Why did Dr. Don Shirley want to do a tour in the Deep South knowing that he would not be welcomed in most restaurants, hotels and other public places because of the color of his skin?” He did it to build community.

Today in our scripture, Paul writes to the church in Corinth. They are struggling with friction and division in the community of believers. The church was divided. Paul is urging them to stop it! Paul says that is time for reconciliation. The old hurts, judgments, pettiness and wounds are past. See, look around, everything is new in Christ! Because we have been reconciled through Christ’s death on the cross, we are free to live a new life.

Paul yearns for them to be in a harmonious community together. He says don’t think of them in a human point of view. Or The Messages says, “Don’t evaluate people by what they have or how they look.” And yet, we struggle with this just like the Corinthians. We are stuck because we are human and everything in our society says there are the “have and have nots!” We are taught from the time that we are little about adjectives describing what we look like...fat, skinny, tall, short, rich, poor, smart, dumb, weak, strong, white, black, brown. We are taught to look and see what is different in each of us.

Paul speaks of reconciliation, which is a word that we don’t use very often in our vocabulary. This past week in our Bible Study, I was glad that the group welcomed me to join them. We talked a lot about this word. Some shared that we think of it used in legal terms. We used to hear the reason for a divorce was “irreconcilable differences.”

One person said that it was a relationship that is mended or repaired. But in some cases, the relationship could not return to its original state. One said it was agreeing to disagree. One said that it is when a wrong is done and two people are trying to move past it. Google defines it as “the restoration of friendly relations.” When it comes to the reconciliation that Paul is speaking of today as it relates to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, it is clear that this kind of reconciliation is forgiveness. It is granting grace!

Paul not only defines reconciliation for us but he also goes on and challenges us. We are given the gift of reconciliation from Christ. Because Christ died for us, we are given a freedom from our sins; and we are given a fresh slate to start all over again as a new creation. But along with the gift of freedom for us comes the challenge of ministering that reconciliation to everyone else.

Have you ever held a grudge against someone else and you have not been able to move past it? How do you feel when you think of that person? Are you happy and have a fuzzy feeling inside or do you get worked up or are you sad for the loss of relationship? Do you feel chained to that grudge or pain? What would it look like to be free of it?

Have you ever been on the receiving end of someone reconciling with you? Someone forgiving you for a past mistake? I don't know about you but it is the best feeling in the world when someone is willing to mend my friendship because of something I have done to hurt them.

My daughter, Sarah, is going through a divorce right now. I know there is a lot of pain that has happened. I am sure that both of them have caused pain. My prayer is that one day over time that they will be able to forgive one another. They will probably never be able to be friends. Or, the pain they caused was right, because I don't believe that God ever condones pain or abuse. But, I hope they can find a peace in letting go and forgiving.

Reconciliation on a bigger scale in the case of war or even divided nations can be extremely difficult. And yet, *Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote, "Without forgiveness there can be no future for a relationship between individuals or within and between nations." One commentator goes on to add, "The future for individuals, for nations, for humanity, and for the earth will depend not on staking claims, not on protecting "our" rights, not in guarding our boundaries, not in waging war, but in this difficult discipline of reconciling forgiveness." (Feasting on the Word – Year C; by Dirk G. Lange; Westminster John Knox Press; 2009; p. 113)*

Paul goes on to call us "ambassadors for Christ." What do you think of when you hear ambassador? I think of a special person appointed to represent a country or organization in a foreign country. I have never met or known an ambassador. But, I think we are all called as special people to be Christ's messengers, his representatives and from what Paul is saying not at home. I think we are being entrusted with the message of reconciliation to the places that are NOT COMFORTABLE. Those places that are foreign to us.

What does being an ambassador for Christ look like to you especially in the areas of being UNCOMFORTABLE. Perhaps, it is approaching a friend to have a difficult conversation...ground that you have never travelled with this person. Perhaps, it is stepping out of your comfort zone and trying to serve God in a different way. Perhaps, it is challenging yourself to look at something with a different perspective. For me, I think about the first couple times I worshipped with Nueva Creación, which totally took me out of my comfort zone. I think about the time I served as a commissioner to the General Assembly and was assigned to the Civil Union and Marriage Committee. I think about for first few times I went to Rockville Women's Prison. Those are all times that I felt like I was an ambassador for Christ.

I will be leaving for the Dominican Republic on this Tuesday. This trip will be focused on planning a mission trip for our congregation in the future. The need to go now came from needing to get the Vacation Bible School supplies there before summer and my husband want to go on his spring break. My hope is to offer a solar oven build along with building relationships with our partners in Tamayo either this fall or early 2020. With our relationship still in the beginning stages with Elsa and Jairo, who are now both pastors, I still feel like an ambassador for Christ. We are continuing to support each other in our ministry. The other reason to go this time is to offer 2 women's retreats in 2 different locations along with children's activities. Before we reach Tamayo, we will be

meeting with the Methodist missionaries, Ardell and Gordy Graner. They are fabulous people. But, my heart goes out to missionaries because they are up against church politics at its worse and still trying to teach the God's love and reconciliation. Our time with them will be spent giving pastoral care and support. It will be a full trip and I look forward to returning with great stories of where I saw the face of Christ.

This is our fourth Sunday of our Lenten journey. We have reached the half-way point. As we leave here today, I ask you to think about the challenge of truthful living. Christ was totally without sin and he takes all of our sin in sacrificing himself to save us. We are reconciled in Christ and given a fresh start every day of our life. Our lives are changed because of him releasing us from this burden. If we aren't truthful about the need for reconciliation with others (and you know their names); and we aren't willing to receive this gift of grace and share it with others, did his sacrifice really mean anything? Thanks be to God for sending us his Son and claiming us as his children. Amen.