



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"For the Love of God, Live On!"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
On January 15th 2023, MLK Sunday from 2 Corinthians 5:14-21*

There's an episode of *This American Life* where a father describes the first time his four-year-old daughter asked him about the meaning of Christmas. The father told his daughter it was the birthday of a person named Jesus, and she wanted to know everything about this person. So, he bought a children's bible they could read together, and she loved it. As they read about Jesus, his daughter asked, "What does that word 'teaching' mean?" The father said, "Well, it means Jesus had a message for the world, which was 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' or 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'" One day they drove past a big church with a big crucifix out front. The four-year-old said, "Who's that Daddy?!" The father thought, "Oh, I guess I never told her that part of the story." So, he said, "That's Jesus. I forgot to tell you the end. The message he had was so radical the government decided to kill him."

About a month later, his daughter out of school for the MLK holiday, and the father was reading a newspaper with a huge picture of MLK. His daughter asked, "Who's that?" The father said, "That's Martin Luther King Jr. He's why you're not in school today. This is the day we celebrate his birthday." The daughter asked, "Who was he?" The father said, "Well, he was a preacher." Suddenly she said, "For Jesus?" "Well, yes!" the father said, "But he had a message too." The father struggled to form his words knowing this was the first time his daughter would ever hear this. He said, "His message was that you should treat everybody the same no matter what they look like." She thought about that for a minute, and said, "That's what Jesus said." The father replied, "I never thought about it but yeah, it is like Jesus' message." The four-year-old girl thought about that for a minute again, and she looked up at her father and said, "Daddy, did they kill him too?"

I tried to find a text to preach on MLK Sunday that was written by somebody who wasn't arrested, imprisoned, or assassinated, so I chose something from the letters of Paul. Oh wait, that's right, they killed him too! Did you know the only book in the New Testament that was not written by or about someone who was executed by the Roman empire is the book of Revelation, which John wrote while he was living in exile. Have you ever stopped to wonder what in God's creation would possess people in the first century cities like Corinth to join a radical movement founded by Jewish teachers who were arrested, imprisoned, and murdered by the Romans?



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Everyone knew it was a dangerous decision, fraught with peril, incredibly risky, and a possibly deadly, right? Many would-be converts would lose their family and friends long before they lost their lives. Why would anybody willingly sign up for that? There had to be something extremely powerful and compelling to risk family, friends, life, and limb to be a part of this movement. It had to be something more powerful than our deeply ingrained human need for self-preservation and strong biological connections with our families. It had to be something more powerful than pain, more powerful than loss, more powerful than fear, and more powerful than death. And there's only one thing more powerful than pain, loss, fear, and death—and that is love—love of our all-fellow human beings, more than money, power, security, family, or anything else in all of Creation. An expansive love.

We all know Paul has been misquoted, manipulated, distorted, and misused in the service of evil to justify slavery, segregation, the subordination of women, the oppression of LGBTQ people, war, violence, and blind obedience to the empire. As scholar Neil Elliot claims that Paul's words have been commandeered by empire and employed as an "ideological weapon of death."ⁱ I've had days where I've heard Paul's words so distorted that I wanted to toss his letters into the fire and watch them burn. But then I remember Paul also said, "there is neither Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free." He also said, "It was for freedom we have been set free" and "Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom." Paul also said, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from love."

Throughout history people have called John "the Apostle of Love," but John's Gospel only has the word *agape* seven times, while there's eighteen appearances of the word in John's first epistle. But Paul used the word "love," or *agape* seventy-five times, which is far more than any other NT writer and more all the gospels combined. Those who have misused Paul as an "ideological weapon of death" have not only missed the point of Paul's letters but are completely out of step with the real "Apostle of Love," whose words about the power of love have appeared in more weddings than anyone else who has lived on the face of the Earth.

There is important reason for us at Myers Park Baptist to wrestle with the words of Paul, and that's because our church covenant is based in Paul's words. Our covenant is the most sacred thing we have as a community of faith because it is a testimony of our commitment to God and each other. As we move toward our 80th anniversary as a church, it is important we recommit ourselves to the covenant.



As it turns out words like “grace” and “freedom,” phrases like “new creatures” and “new creation” and “reconciliation” that appear in our covenant all have their origin in the letters of Paul; especially this passage 2 Corinthians 5. So, if we want to understand the vows we’ve made to each other and the community we are striving to be together, we need to regularly return to these words from Paul.

Carolyn Geer was the chair of the Covenant Committee formed in the spring of 1978, and she told me she accepted the position reluctantly and made chocolate chip cookies for the first meeting to try get things off to a good start. The committee met for over a year and spent countless hours arguing and debating every word. Carolyn said they began by reading John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, which is where the term “journey of faith” comes from. But she also said they studied many of the covenants in the Bible and everyone was particularly inspired by the language they found in 2 Corinthians 5. I wonder what Carolyn and her committee members saw in Paul’s words to the Corinthians that was so captivating, energizing, and animating?

Perhaps it was the fresh vision we find here of who we are called to be, how we are called to live, and what we are called to do—a vision that somehow had the power and the magnetism to compel Romans, Greeks, and Jews living in one of the largest cities in the Roman empire to join a movement started by an itinerant Galilean who was arrested and crucified for blasphemy and treason. Paul wasn’t offering the people of Corinth a new world view, or a new religion, or new morals and rituals, or even a new spirituality. He was inviting the Corinthians into a radically new way of life—a completely different kind of society. Paul said, “For the love of Christ urges us on, because of Jesus’ death and resurrection we no longer live for ourselves. From now on we regard no one from a human point of view. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

He didn’t say our minds, our hearts, or our souls have become new—he said everything! He didn’t say our faith, our spirituality, or our religion have become new—he said everything! He didn’t say our individual, private, or family lives have become new—he said everything! Everything has become new, beginning first and foremost with how we see people—how we look at each other. We no longer regard anyone from a human point of view. We view everyone and everything as a new creation.



Why does this matter? Because Corinth was a Roman colony that was rebuilt by Julius Caesar into one of the largest cities in all of Greece and inhabited (as most Roman colonies were) by veterans of Caesar's army, the formerly enslaved, and urban commoners of different ethnicities and religions. The colonists and their descendants were considered citizens, but the Greeks and the Jews were treated as resident aliens with no rights who were not allowed to hold office or vote in elections. It was a hierarchical caste system of Roman colonization that endowed Roman citizens with rights and power and disenfranchised everyone else.

When Paul said, "We regard no one from a human point of view," he was saying we no longer regard Romans as better, or more powerful, or superior, or citizens, with rights and power granted to them justly by the state, and we no longer regard Greeks and Jews as lesser, weaker, inferior, aliens, without rights or power." That was a radical and dangerous thing to proclaim! Paul was speaking treason to established order of Roman society, fluently without fear. If Paul's brazenness was not compelling enough, the new creation he was describing offered people on the bottom rung of the social ladder who were living in Corinth with their backs against the wall without any rights or power an extraordinary invitation to come together as one body despite their differences and create an entirely new community.

Every MLK weekend we hear stories about Dr. King and his legacy of love, peace, freedom, justice—and we especially hear the word "reconciliation," that comes from 2 Corinthians 5 and appears in our covenant. This word will casually be thrown around this weekend by commentators who have no idea where the word comes from or what it really means. Some will even use it to espouse cheap forms of racial harmony that require no sacrifice, work, or responsibility. But there's a story about Dr. King you won't hear this weekend from Harry Belafonte's memoir *My Song*, that shows that what King really meant by reconciliation.

On March 27, 1968, a week before he was killed in Memphis, Martin Luther King Jr. joined Andrew Young, and several other confidants for an evening gathering at the New York City apartment of the singer and civil rights activist Harry Belafonte. Earlier that day, King had met with the poet Amiri Baraka in Newark, a city still reeling from the deadly riots of the previous summer. It was a city, King feared, that was poised to erupt all over again. At the time, King was working to organize the Poor People's Campaign, what was to be a multiracial march on and occupation of Washington, D.C.: a mass demonstration meant to press the American people into a serious confrontation with material poverty.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

That evening in New York, King was in a “surly mood.” He confided in Belafonte and others that his meeting in Newark with Baraka had affected him. The suffocating conditions there and an increasing willingness of the city’s youth to embrace violent resistance tactics were once again testing his long-haul strategy of nonviolent change. “I wholly embrace everything they feel,” King said of the militant contingent in Newark. He said, “I have more in common with these young people than anybody else in this movement. I feel their rage, their pain, their frustration. It’s the system that’s the problem, and it’s choking the breath out of our lives.”

As Belafonte recalls, Andrew Young—future U. S. Congressman and Ambassador to the United Nations—unwittingly intensified King’s anger. “I don’t know, Martin,” Young said. “It’s not the entire system. It’s only part of it, and I think we can fix that.” King was having none of it. “I don’t need to hear that from you, Andy,” he clapped back. “You’re a capitalist, and I’m not. The trouble is we live in a failed system. Capitalism does not permit an even flow of economic resources; with a small privileged few who are rich beyond conscience, and almost all others are doomed to be poor. That’s the way the system works. And since we know the system will not change the rules, we’re going to have to change the system.”ⁱⁱ

Cosmetic alterations won’t do, King said we’re going to have to change the whole system. Similarly, Paul also claimed if we are new creations we will be engaged in the ministry of reconciliation, but we’ve watered down the concept of reconciliation and it has lost its meaning. The dictionary states reconciliation is “the restoration of friendly relations,” but that’s not what Paul meant. There were no friendly relationships between Romans, Greeks, and Jews. There was nothing to go back to—nothing to restore. At best it would have been conciliation, but that’s not what reconciliation is. The Greek word for reconciliation, *katallasso* means “to change.” Paul said if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation which means everything old has passed away and become new. Reconciliation means everything must change. Reconciliation is the work we do that makes all things new. It’s not about being nice or copacetic in our relationships; it is about working together to create a new community where no one is regarded from a human point of view; a beloved community. Reconciliation is the name for the work we do to create beloved community.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Just like Paul, Dr. King's words have been misquoted, manipulated, distorted, and misused to justify cheap grace and colorblind racism, to glorify American, to fetishize non-violence, or support a political party, or to seduce us into a shallow and sentimental concept of love. But that's not the real King. Every time he talked about reconciliation King envisioned the beloved community. He said, "the aftermath of violence is bitterness and chaos, but the aftermath of love is reconciliation and the creation of beloved community." He said, "the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community." What Jesus, Paul, and King all strived to eliminate was any "distinction between superior and inferior humans,"ⁱⁱⁱ because all our problems boil down to that. It was the invention of superior and inferior beings that "was necessary for slavery, colonialism, the theft of lands in the Americas, and genocide," [and all manner of evils in human history]. So, we have to eliminate the distinction between superior and inferior people—seeing from a human point of view—so we can become new creations who live together in beloved community. The ministry of reconciliation is the activity that tears down all the lies and hierarchies that elevate some people over others.

Of course, speaking out against the hierarchy of human beings is the kind of thing that can get you killed or crucified. So, what in God's creation would possess people living in the first century world to accept Paul's invitation to be ministers of reconciliation. I guess it's the same thing that possessed a former Pharisee who was hunting Christians to become an apostle to the Gentiles. I guess it's the same thing that would possess someone living in first century Corinth to join a radical movement that was founded by two Jewish teachers who were arrested, imprisoned, and murdered by the Romans. I guess it's the same thing that would possess people to join a radical movement led a black man who was shot to death on a hotel balcony in Memphis.

It had to be something more powerful than our deeply ingrained human need for self-preservation. It had to be something more powerful than pain, more powerful than loss, more powerful than fear, and more powerful than death. And there's only one thing more powerful than pain, loss, fear, and death—and that is love. Love is what gives us the strength and the courage to climb every mountain, walk through every valley, every trial and tribulation, for the sake of creating a better world.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

People are hurting in our world. Do we love them or not? People are struggling in our world. Do we love them or not? People are suffering in our world. Do we love them or not? People are dying in our world. Do we love them or not? Paul said that it is love of God and each other that urges us on. It's never been a passion for justice first and foremost but love first and justice as what love looks like in the public sphere. It's not equality first but love first and equality as what love looks like in community. It all starts with love—love for God and for our fellow human beings—a love so powerful that possesses us with the courage to be ministers of reconciliation, ministers of change, who embody the new creation, and build beloved community in a world that is bent on violence and destruction. This is what our covenant calls us to be!

So, for the love of God keep on loving. For the love of God keep on going. For the love of God keep pressing on. For the love of God keep pushing. For the love of God keep singing. For the love of God keep dancing. For the love of God keep marching. For the love of God fighting. For the love of God keep caring. For the love of God keep teaching. For the love of God keep speaking. For the love of God keep rolling. For the love of God keep praying. For the love of God keep playing. For the love of God keep aiming to create a world where no one is regarded from a human point of view. For the love of God keep on going because we need you! We need you and all of us working together as ministers of reconciliation who are striving to make everything new, and striving to build a beloved community, because that is what Jesus, Paul, and Dr. King, all called us to do. So, for the love of God, live on.

ⁱ Neil Elliot, *Liberating Paul*, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Harry Belafonte, *My Song: A Memoir*, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Dawson, "Hidden in Plain Sight," 147–148.