

Ambassadors for Christ

Meditation on 2 Corinthians 5:16–21

March 6, 2016

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

“From now on, therefore, 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.”

I was online this week, posting my sermon at my blog, writing emails and responding to Facebook messages and it occurred to me how important Internet communication has become to us as a society--and a church. How powerful a tool it is for ministry! With the Internet, you can quickly and easily communicate with people everywhere in the world, at any time of the day or night--from wherever you are. Talk about going beyond the church walls with the message of God's love!

I was pleased to discover, before I came here, that our church has a great Website **and** a Facebook page, regularly updated. I am happy to see that in our congregation--from the very young to more than 80 years old--people are willing to share their joy with the world :o)

Last Saturday, I had tears of joy to catch a video posted by my friend

Phyllis in MN. And it motivated me to pick up the phone and give her a call! Phyllis is not into computers; that's her husband's thing. But she wanted to share with all her friends and family her 3-year-old granddaughter, Addy, and her first attempt at riding a trike. And it's not just any trike. It's the one her daddy rode when he was a little boy.

I like how the video begins, with Grandpa Dennis squirting W-D40 on the wheels. And how she starts off with her feet on the ground--powering the trike "Flintstone style." Grandma cheers her on, while Addy, ponytail swinging, begins to pedal. It looks like hard labor, at first, doesn't it? Slowly, the trike begins to move... Did you notice that she has trouble moving forward, when she keeps looking behind her?

Her attitude changes when she reaches the end of the path and who does she see? Daddy! Suddenly, riding the trike is easy! It's just a tool to take her to her destination--her father's adoring arms.

Off she goes, with joyful anticipation! Did you catch what Grandpa Dennis says? "Show off mode!"

It's really too bad for Paul that he didn't have all the technology we have today that makes communication with far away friends so quick, easy and efficient. For Paul had some serious communication issues with the churches that he planted--and these, though not actually causing all the conflict, certainly didn't help solve the churches' problems. The church at Corinth, in particular, presented interesting challenges for the apostle.

Paul arrived in Corinth in the fall of A.D. 50. Corinth was a prosperous city-state on the narrow stretch of land that joins the Peloponnese to the

mainland of Greece. He came alone the first time; Timothy and Silvanus were busy with the churches in Macedonia. In Corinth, Paul meets and becomes friends and partners with Aquila and Priscilla, a couple with a successful tent-making business. They had been in Corinth since the Emperor Claudius had expelled them from Rome in A.D. 49, along with the other Jews. Paul stayed in Corinth about 18 months on his first visit, when he was falsely accused and expelled from the synagogue. The congregation began meeting in a villa, though, and grew. But some members of the Corinthian church were of the wealthy, urban elite class with which Paul--who identified himself with the lower classes, insisted on working for his own living, and not taking money from the Corinthians--did not always get along. Paul left Corinth and ended up in Ephesus, planting and guiding a new church, for 3 years. That's where he wrote 1 and 2 Corinthians, as well as other letters to the church that did not survive. In the meantime, a gifted Alexandrian Jew named Apollos, who preached and spoke better than Paul, visited the Corinthian church, as did none other than Cephas (Peter, the leading disciple of the Lord), both of whom the Corinthian church liked more than Paul. They questioned his qualifications for ministry after that and struggled with conflict from within. When Paul heard that the church failed to separate from people within the believing community who were sexually immoral, he responded with a letter that has not survived, mentioned in 1 Corinthians. But the church misunderstands his letter and thinks he means they should separate completely from Corinthian society. Then the church writes Paul with questions about food sacrificed to idols, temple worship, speaking in tongues and other controversial issues of the time. Paul, in 1 Cor. 16:17, says Stephanus and two other men, brought this letter to him. Then, just as that letter arrives, a delegation shows up bringing news that the

Corinthian church is dividing into factions. He deals with this in 1 Cor. 1:11, and continues to address serious problems, including members suing one another and doubts about the resurrection of the dead.

Will Paul's frustration with the Corinthians ever end?? Paul sends Timothy to the Corinthian church to explain his letter to them, as well as bring back a reliable report on what is really going on. As Paul plans to travel to Macedonia, more bad news from the Corinthian church arrives. The news is so serious that Paul decides to go to the Corinthian church a year earlier than he had planned. Details of the crisis are not spelled out, but Paul speaks of sexual sin and debauchery in 2 Cor. 12:21, and "quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder" in 12:20. He prepares to go to Corinth, but then changes his plans and goes to Macedonia, delaying his visit to Corinth, and creating more hard feelings when he writes, instead, a "severe" letter, now lost to us, but mentioned in 2 Cor. 2:3-4 and 7:8-12. He immediately regrets sending it, fearing it will mean the end of his relationship with the Corinthians. But then he goes on to the Macedonian churches, seeking to solve problems there, before Titus brings him the message that things are both better **and** worse in Corinth. Then Paul writes the letter we call 2 Corinthians in A.D. 55, in response to Titus's report and in preparation for his third and final visit to Corinth.

So hearing all this background, aren't you amazed that we find this beautifully written passage, expressing the joy and promise for every Christian that we don't have to look back and remember the sins and brokenness of the past, for we are not what we used to be, not when we believe on our Lord Jesus Christ?! Paul teaches that we have a different purpose, an important role to play in God's kingdom, when we place our

trust in Jesus Christ and surrender our lives to him.

Paul, gentle this time, reminds the Corinthians, *“For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore **all have died**. And he died for all, so that those who live **might live no longer for themselves**, but for him who died and was raised for them.”* Then he tells them in a nice way that they need to change the way they look at the world and the Church. *“From now on,”* he continues, *“we regard no one from a human point of view...”*

Does it surprise you that he tells this divided, struggling church that theirs is a ministry of reconciliation--when they are not reconciled to Paul or one another, let alone able to reach out with the love of Christ to a hurting world? Paul is saying what we say when we pass the peace after the assurance of God's grace:

“Since God has forgiven us in Christ, let us forgive one another. The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with us all!”

And now, miracle of all miracles, broken, sinful people like us are entrusted with the job of being *ambassadors for Christ*, with God making his appeal to the nations, through us! How can this be?

The answer is in 2 Cor. 5:17: so brief and concise in the Greek, **“If anyone in Christ, new creation.** Everything old has passed away; **see, everything** has become new!” The key word is “see”! Believe that we **are** who Christ has re-made us to be--ambassadors, for Him, though we may never have truly lived with the joy and confidence that belongs to the one who is, “in Christ, new creation.” If and when we **see**, then we can't help but forgive others, for God doesn't count our trespasses against us! Think of little Addy, pedaling the trike as fast as she can; it is hard, slow work, for someone who has never pedaled before. But her loving family cheers her on.

She looks back fearfully, worried she might be alone, but she's not. Her bright future lies ahead.

Then her smiling father appears, waiting to take her in a warm embrace-- just as God waits for us to let go of the old that has passed away and see everyone and everything as God sees us.

In Christ--new creation! Ambassadors, for Him!

And suddenly, traveling this journey of faith is no longer hard; it's easy -- for our brothers and sisters in Christ cheer us on. May we keep our eyes on our destination-- our smiling heavenly Father, waiting with arms open wide. Off we go, now, with joyful anticipation!

Let us pray.

Holy One, thank you for your Son, who has reconciled us to Him through His suffering and death on a cross. Thank you, loving God, for reconciling all Creation to yourself. Thank you for entrusting us with the message of reconciliation -- being reconciled to you and one another. Help us to share this with the world by modeling forgiveness and reconciliation in our own families, communities and congregation. Forgive us for getting stuck in the past, sometimes, not letting go of hurts and refusing to see the world as you want us to see it--the Kingdom of God drawing near. Give us courage to be Christ's ambassadors. Stir us to share the promise and hope you have placed within us--*if anyone in Christ, new creation!* In Christ we pray. Amen.