

2 Corinthians 5:11-21 - August 7, 2022 Reconciliation - A New Creation

Today's excerpt from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is an especially crucial passage not only in the Corinthian correspondence, but in the Pauline corpus as a whole. It is laden with Pauline themes, such as a new creation in Christ, reconciliation, and the righteousness of God. In Christ there is a new creation; all that distorts in the systems and in the worlds we have created for ourselves and others, is now archaic. Paul writes, "The old life is gone; a new life has begun!"

This gives us a radically fresh perspective on life. We no longer need to view others based on our own human criteria, in the same way that we no longer view Jesus as just one more martyr for a righteous cause. Paul initially experienced Christ from his human perspective. This does not mean that Paul had no interest in the historical Jesus as some scholars have suggested, rather, what Paul is saying is that previously he had a completely inadequate knowledge of Christ, one based on a human point of view, but not anymore. His understanding of Christ is no longer limited by his old point of view.

Paul, along with other First Century Jews, would have shared expectation that Jesus would be a political and military messiah. This resulted in the failure to see Christ as the Messiah on God's mission, because Paul and the other Jews saw Christ through human eyes rather than God's eyes. As expected this led Paul to the wrong conclusion about Christ. Paul changed his perspective, on the road to Damascus, after his encounter with the risen Christ. Paul no longer saw things as he had previously; the old ways of looking, perceiving, understanding, and, more profoundly, evaluating, have to be let go and replaced with a new way of seeing and understanding.

Paul states that: "*This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person.* For Paul this is a "new act of creation" which God has undertaken through Christ, meaning that Paul does not imply an individual subjective view. For Paul, new creation is the basis for the newness of life. In Paul's view, new creation nullifies the old order, it makes everything new. Even though, the old order, seems to linger, this reality will not be for long. The day is already dawning and the night is already over. In the meantime those in Christ live in what scholars have dubbed the "already and not yet".

All this comes from God, who has reconciled us to Godself and who has now given us not a special status to lord it over others - or to be immune from life's suffering, as we heard last week, but a ministry or a service (*diakonia*) of reconciliation. And

this *diakonia* is grounded in the fact that in Christ, God was reconciling the entire cosmos to Godself; not judging us, not calculating our trespasses against us, yet entrusting us with a message or a word (*logos*) of reconciliation for everyone.

When we look at our churches, our congregations, we might ask; “Is this **really** the Kingdom of God?” With all the issues, misunderstandings and short-comings’ “**Is** this really the Kingdom of God? We have liabilities in this life; things fall so far short; life challenges these experiences, experiences that underscore our own limitations. One’s own short comings and failings are called to faith by the Gospel.

In Christ, God reconciles us to Godself, and consequently we are reconciled to each other, and thereby reconciled to the world. The ongoing work of ministry is to be constantly reconciled.

In the passages read over the past few weeks, Paul talks about consolation and forgiveness realizing it’s God’s power working in us and not our own. Walking by faith and not by sight leads to reconciliation because we know we are flawed human beings. Because we are forgiven, we forgive, we are reconciled to one another.

God in Christ is reconciling the world to Godself. It would be different if God were reconciling self to the world. God would say, “The world is messed up - so get used to it.” That is not the Gospel message. Rather reconciliation is a transformative word. What does it mean to be reconciling to the world, to God? That’s where the element of transformation comes in. People are calling communities beyond where they are to be a transformative power in the world.

It’s the kind of restlessness brought on by not getting used to the idea that things are not what they should be and simply learning to live with it. God is about more than that. We see this restlessness in God’s action. As Paul stated: *For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people’s sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation.*

In summarizing the Gospel, this verse is probably just as important a statement as that found in John: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.*

If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. This is more than a little self-improvement. God creates relationships anew. This is something we cannot accomplish on our own. It’s not based on us. Faith is not something we can self-generate. It calls people into a relationship we are not capable of initiating. It recognizes that what’s happening is that the God creates again and again in ways

that we can't accomplish by a little bit of self-improvement. The reality is that the act of a New Creation is not based on human capacities but on a defined action that brings about these new forms of relationship that are truly transformative.

Now Paul was facing divisions amongst his people. The Corinthians are divided over who is in and who is out, and they're basing it on how well the members follow the Law. One side says that everyone must be circumcised; and another says that circumcision is not necessary. But Paul implores the people to look beyond the outward appearance, and to instead look into one another's hearts, and to reconcile with God as well as with other church members.

At the beginning of the birth of the Church, Christians of Jewish background leapt over the wall that separated them from believers from other backgrounds or cultures. For them, this meant giving up some strict dietary and behavioural rules; it broadened the way they conceived their relationship with God. During the following two millennia, in their practice and teaching, Christians did not always show such boldness in integrating cultural differences.

In Brazil, a powerful trend over the past fifty years or so has caused the Pentecostal churches to grow to the detriment of the traditional denominations. Most of the converts come from a poor background. After their conversion, they willingly witness to their faith by saying, "I used to be this and that, now I am a new man (or woman) because I have accepted Christ." And they tell you about the features of this "new self" that can be seen and verified by all: "I no longer drink. I no longer smoke. I respect my spouse. My children go to school. I am learning to read and write. I go to church all the time..." These are wonderful changes, but again, simple self-improvement rather than a creation of new relationships.

In these communities, strong bonds of fellowship unite the members. They help one another, materially as well as morally, to stay on the right road. And yet their attitude towards other churches, or those who are not a part of their closed community, tends to be one of suspicion, or even of hostility and contempt, as if the work of reconciliation stopped at the door of their own community.

In society and between different countries, as well as among Christians, the natural tendency is to take sides, to accept some and to exclude others. It is difficult not to have any prejudices, "no longer to look at anyone from a human point of view." For that involves becoming aware of one's own limitations, realizing that some aspects of my own personality can be difficult for others to accept.

Paul's appeal for reconciliation arises out of a complex, messy human situation. As much as he desires the Corinthians to be reconciled to God, Paul also earnestly yearns for some kind of reconciliation between the Corinthians and himself. Paul probably does not think of these as two separate issues. Rather, Paul probably recognizes that what goes on in human communities, how we relate to one another, has implications for how we relate to God. It is not just about us; nor is it just about God. It is about how we understand ourselves to be in relationship with God and with one another, all in the same moment. The two are inextricably linked.

So Paul presents two ways of viewing one another using the example of Christ. At one time, he says, we looked at the one we call the Christ and saw, well, nothing special: perhaps a prophet, perhaps a fool. We judged on the basis of our human experience or human point of view. Then something happened: something that allowed us to see in Christ the one in and through whom God reconciles the world to God's self. This "something" is very likely different for each of us. However, the effect is that we experience the presence of God not only in our own lives, but come to recognize the presence of God permeating the entire cosmos. Our way of seeing has changed, as well as our understanding of how we are in the world.

If we recognize ourselves as a part of this new creation, then we no longer view one another in the same way. Our vision has changed. Reconciliation is not simply something to be desired; it's an imperative because we have experienced reconciliation with the one who has given us (new) life. If, in this most important of all relationships, we find that our "trespasses" (which can also be rendered "missteps") are not held against us, we too are challenged to reach across the boundaries and barriers that separate us, whether due to missteps, misunderstandings, or misconceptions, and find ways to renew our relationships as a part of the on-going act of creation.

Related to having the ministry of reconciliation, is Paul's ambassadorial role. Paul does not represent a human king, but the God of the universe, who has endorsed and given him authority to speak for him. As an ambassador of God, Paul would have been commissioned to represent God and exercise authority on his behalf.

To be an ambassador for Jesus Christ is a great honour. It is an honour to be chosen to be an ambassador and represent the greatest and only God there is, Jesus Christ. He has been the most positive influence here on earth for the past two thousand years, and we have the distinct privilege of being his ambassador.

There is no need to be ashamed of Jesus Christ and the love of God who created the whole universe in all of its beauty. This same God died for us on the cross, and there

is no need to be ashamed of this God and what God has done for all of us. Yes, we can be ashamed of the Church and many of the Church's activities through the centuries. Yes, we can be ashamed of the actions of other Christians and shake our head in disappointment. Yes, we can be ashamed of own imperfect actions and shake our heads in disappointment with our own lives.

But we are not ambassadors who represent the Church, other Christians or even ourselves. The Bible tells us that we are ambassadors for Jesus Christ. It is as high a distinction as we can ever get. The thought of the word, ambassador, brings to mind, someone of high distinction; and so it is with us as Christians. It is a high honour and great privilege to be an ambassador for Jesus Christ.

Now, we can be "in church" and not be a new person. When a person is in Christ, that person is changed. It is possible to be "in Church" but not in Christ. Not once in the entire Bible does it talk about the importance of being "in Church." Not once. The primary religious experience is always to be in Christ. The power of life is found in being in Christ, not "in church." When a person is in Christ, he or she is a new person. This is the primary message of the Christian faith.

God makes his appeal to others through us. We are the means by which God speaks to those around us. An ambassador knows the message of God and speaks the message of God into a particular situation. Today, the question is: What does it mean for you to be an ambassador for Jesus Christ in your particular situation, in the year 2022, here in British Columbia, on Vancouver Island ?

Paul says: So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!"

Amen.