

Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5: 14-21 The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: one died for the sake of all; therefore, all died. ¹⁵ He died for the sake of all so that those who are alive should live not for themselves but for the one who died for them and was raised. ¹⁶ So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him now. ¹⁷ So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived! ¹⁸ All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. ¹⁹ In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" ²¹ God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God.

Reconciliation

Last week we explored the story of twin brothers who had a terrible relationship. It was so bad that it separated them by hundreds of miles. Jacob had manipulated his brother Esau and taken the larger share of the inheritance that belonged to his brother. Then, through cunning, fraud, and lies, Jacob had deceived their father into declaring that he was to be the leader of the next generation. But after twenty years, Jacob and Esau met and were reconciled. It was a tearful meeting as Jacob humbled himself before his brother, undoing their father's blessing that he had taken through deceit. Jacob put his money where his mouth was and tried to repay his brother for having taken the larger inheritance that, by custom, belonged to Esau. But twenty years later, Esau was able to set aside wrath and vengeance. Jacob put aside pride and greed. Put poetically, Esau died to anger and revenge. Jacob died to his life of cheating and ambition at all costs. And reconciliation was the result.

The Apostle Peter wrote that there were some things in Paul's writings that were hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16). Today's reading from Second Corinthians certainly falls into that category. Paul was a deep thinker and he sometimes wrote about complex issues. We know that he dictated his letters and that can cause problems, too. When we talk, we aren't so careful about sentence structure and about grammar being correct, but our gestures, our tone of voice, our pauses, and inflection usually make our meaning clear. All of that gets lost in dictation. And it doesn't help one bit that ancient Greek was written without commas, periods, question marks, exclamation marks, or any other punctuation. But some of what Paul is telling us is pretty clear.

In verse fifteen, Paul says that Jesus died for the sake of all. Right away, we often fail to think clearly about this. We say, "Jesus died for my sins." We say to someone else, "Jesus died for you." It's always about an individual. But Paul said, "Jesus died for the sake of all." "All" is a very big word, even if it is only three letters long. All. You will never meet anybody, you will never see a news story about anybody, you will never hear about anybody who isn't included in the word "all." All includes the newscaster you just can't stand, the dirty, smelly person pushing the grocery cart filled with garbage bags containing all they own, the rich snob who doesn't know you exist and doesn't care, the drug user who abuses his children, the ex-spouse who hurt you to the quick. All goes places we don't even want to think about.

Now, why would Jesus die for the sake of all? The rest of verse fifteen gives the reason – and Paul doesn't say what we might expect. Paul says that Jesus did this so that we would live not for ourselves, but for Jesus. All this time you've been wondering where the expression, "It ain't

about you!” came from. Well, here it is. Paul says, “It ain’t about you. Stop living for yourself. Live for Jesus.” “Live for Jesus” is catchy phrase, but like that little word *all*, it’s bigger than we might think. Living for Jesus isn’t just about singing a powerful praise chorus seventeen times until everyone has a mildly hypnotic and ecstatic experience. That’d be about our internal feeling, not our outward love. Paul says in verse fourteen, “The love of Christ controls us,” but that doesn’t mean that we’re to be all focused on ways to say and sing, “I love you Jesus.” No, Paul is saying that Christ’s love, the love that Jesus showed, is to take charge of how we love.

“Therefore,” says Paul, “from now on, we won’t see people by human standards. We used to see Jesus by human standards.” It was important to us that he was a descendant of David. We judged his actions with regard to detailed interpretations of the law regarding the Sabbath. We worried about the company he kept, and whether he was off his rocker at times. But that isn’t how we know him now. Now we realize that he was so filled with God’s Spirit that it was no wonder that he didn’t act like most people. And now we understand that seeing people in light of human standards isn’t what we need to be doing. We need to be inspired and moved by the love that Christ showed, and then we, too, will be motivated to show that same love to others. Jesus was all about all, not just about some. In fact, Jesus said if we love just our friends and family who are nice to us, so what? Murderers, thieves, and all kinds of evil acting people do that. That’s acting by human standards. But Jesus loved strangers. He ate with pompous people who thought they were better than anybody else. He talked to despicable Samaritans and those hated Roman army officers. He sought out greedy tax collectors to eat with them. Jesus was all about all.

And, Paul goes on to say, “This changes everything.” This is a different way of seeing each other; this is different from the world you’ve known. This isn’t how Caesar’s Roman Empire works, this isn’t the dog-eat-dog relationship that you see all around you, this isn’t tit-for-tat, this isn’t grab all you can because you’re afraid someone else will get it. This isn’t about you. It’s about all. This is a whole ‘nother country – this is God’s world, this is God’s kingdom. This way of seeing the world, this way of seeing each other, this way of living - is from God.

Some of us worry about what God thinks of us. We’ve been told that we need to “get right with God.” And we can fret and worry and try to figure out if we’re good enough for God to like us. It can consume us to try to figure out what the minimum standards are for us to have paid up eternal fire insurance. What does our ticket to “glory land” cost? Whatever way we express it, what we’re trying to do is feel like we’re reconciled with God. But Paul has more gospel, more good news to share with us. God has reconciled us to himself through Christ by not counting people’s sins against them. That’s what it says. We just can’t seem to believe it, but that’s what Paul says. God isn’t out to get us. God is out to save us. We just can’t seem to get that through our heads. We can’t imagine that much love. We can’t let go of our guilt. We can’t imagine a relationship where vengeance isn’t even a factor in the equation. But Paul says God has reconciled us to himself.

That being said, do we just close our Bibles, and forget about God because our future is signed and sealed? Is this kind of like having your gall bladder removed – now you never have to even give gallstones a moment’s thought? Well, no. We’ve been given something to do. We’ve been given a ministry. We might expect Paul to say that now we have the ministry of saving souls, or the ministry of bring people to Christ. But Paul says that we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. We’ve been trusted with the message of reconciliation. That’s what Jesus did. He went about doing reconciliation. Now we are ambassadors who represent Christ. What we’ve received, we’re to give to others. You can think of this as pay it forward. Or we might think of it as paying it outward.

How can we spread the message of reconciliation? On a huge scale, that’s what was done in South Africa after the end of apartheid. Instead of seeking revenge for all of the beatings and killings in the streets – or in the courts – instead a system was set up to promote reconciliation. Instead of being mired in a blood bath for years, South Africa experienced peace. At the end of World War II,

instead of imposing reparations on the defeated Axis, the Marshall Plan provided help and promoted reconciliation. We'd do well to remember that we're to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

This is just as important in our personal lives. It should color the way we talk about our ex-spouse, especially in front of our children. It needs to affect how we look at the person down the street who has an accent, the man or woman who is trying to keep their family together on a part-time minimum wage job, the young adult who made a really bad choice and is now suffering from addiction. Jacob and Esau found reconciliation by letting go of anger and greed. Reconciliation is found in offering love and compassion instead of dispensing guilt and judgment. Reconciliation is about seeing worth where many would only see worthlessness. Reconciliation is when we see others through the eyes of Jesus and treat them as Jesus did,

Ambassadors speak and act for the nation that they represent. We are ambassadors for Christ. We are ambassadors for the kingdom of God. Remember who you speak for. You have been given the ministry of reconciliation. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
Go forth as ambassadors for Christ,
in whom we have new life.