



CHURCH of  
the SAVIOUR

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## “Represent”

August 16, 2020

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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We are in week three of a sermon series titled “Love Is the Goal,” the precursor for our initiative this fall called “Holding Up Our Corner” to become an intentionally anti-racist congregation. Being anti-racist doesn’t mean simply *not being racist*. It means being committed to *confronting* racism in ourselves, our relationships, and our world by addressing both the effects of racism and the structures, systems, and policies that cause or contribute to racial inequity in our society. But it is important for us to understand that being anti-racist is not the goal in and of itself. Confronting injustice is not the goal. *Love is the goal*. We want to be people who reflect God’s perfect love, a love we experience in Christ Jesus, a love that brings healing and wholeness. Standing for justice and being actively anti-racist is part of how we live into that goal. Love is our “why,” the reason we are doing what we are doing. *Love is the goal*.

Toward that end I invite us to consider this morning Paul’s teaching found in 2 Corinthians 5. This is part of Paul’s great letter of reconciliation, written in response to conflict between the people in the church at Corinth and, to a lesser degree, with Paul himself. It is a passionate, heartfelt attempt to repair deep brokenness and reestablish a focus on faith. I want to start in the middle of the passage because it sets the context both for Paul’s hope for the Corinthian church and for the work that we are undertaking together over the coming weeks.

Paul lays the foundation for the work of reconciliation by pointing to God’s work of salvation. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” *Reconciliation*, the joining in peaceful relationship of those who were once at odds. In Christ, God closed the gap between fallen humanity and divine love. Reconciliation is rooted in God’s saving work in us. Paul longed for reconciliation with those he had hurt. He longed for factions within the church to come together. His longing grew out of a deep conviction that God in Christ had broken down the divisions between us. But God didn’t stop there. God reconciled us to Godself, then entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation. Because we know what it means to be forgiven and redeemed, we are called to carry that ministry into the world.

In the life of the church, we often focus on Christian unity. At Church of the Saviour, we have great diversity of thought, which means that we do not always agree on a variety of topics. We’re not alone in that; many churches have to navigate differences of opinion, politics, theological perspectives, socioeconomics, and so on. But too often, churches settle for placid coexistence, an ethereal notion of “spiritual unity” as a way to defuse tensions within the congregation.<sup>1</sup> While it is true that we are made one in Christ, focusing our energy on internal unity distracts us from our calling in the world. What good is Christian unity if it does not lead to addressing the needs of the world? All baptized Christians take a vow to “resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.” That is the core of our Christian calling. We should be united, yes, but united not for the sake of peaceful coexistence within cloistered communities. *We are saved for a purpose*. We are called to be united *in mission* – reconciling the world to God by resisting evil, injustice, and oppression and bringing healing and wholeness in relationship to God. That mission isn’t fueled by our goodness or cleverness, but is always rooted in and empowered by God’s saving action in Christ.

Note the direction of the action of reconciliation: “God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people’s sins against them.” God was not being reconciled to us, but us to God. God’s

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Wu. “What It Means to Be a Body in Hong Kong.” *The Christian Century*. Online: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/what-it-means-be-body-hong-kong>. Accessed August 12, 2020.

nature and righteousness are never changing, a conviction we assert in our scriptures and in our singing: “Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not. As thou hast been, thou forever wilt be.” But the *world* is constantly changing. So are we, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. The gap between us and God didn’t happen because God changed, but because we moved away from God. Paul’s message is that in Christ, God reconciled the world to Godself, and that includes us. That is, we were and are being restored in relationship to God who does not count our failures against us but loves us back into relationship in spite of our failings.

“So,” Paul continues, “we are ambassadors who represent Christ.” The word translated as “ambassadors” is *presbeuó*, used in the Greco-Roman world to describe official emissaries, especially the emperor’s legates. Though Paul is referring here to himself and his companions, the implication is that those who minister to the Gospel – not just vocational ministers, but all who share the Good News – are given this calling. We are God’s official messengers, Christ’s representatives in the world. We represent Christ by our words and our actions – indeed, by our very lives. We had better take seriously the Christ we reflect if we are his representatives. Paul urges us, therefore, to be reconciled to God. In other words, accept what God has done and is doing in Christ to restore and renew us. Christ took upon himself everything that causes separation between us and God so that we could be restored. As beneficiaries of that gift, we, in turn, stand in the gap against the forces that would separate the world from God’s grace, all that threatens the health and wholeness of God’s creation, that which would keep us from realizing the kingdom of God.

So, what does all of this mean in the context of love? If love is the goal, what part does *reconciliation* play in achieving that goal? Let’s go back to verse 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.”

What does it mean to say we used to know Christ by human standards? One suspects Paul had his own faith journey in mind. You will recall that before Paul was the great evangelist and writer of epistles, he was Saul, the leading persecutor of Christians in and around Jerusalem. Previously, he had considered Jesus nothing more than a pretender, a false messiah, a trouble-making teacher whose followers stirred up discontent and threatened the fragile balance between Jewish authority and Roman occupation. He was the enforcer, separating families, dragging people from their homes in the middle of the night, watching over the stoning of Stephen who dared to share his testimony about Jesus. But one day, on the road to Damascus, everything changed. A brilliant flash of light, a voice from heaven, an encounter with the risen Christ. Saul became Paul, being transformed from distributor of terror to dispenser of grace. Where he once saw Jesus as a nuisance, now he knew him as Savior. What he once considered an insurrection he now saw as the way to life.

Because Paul’s eyes had been opened to see through faith, he could no longer regard others by human standards, either. That’s what Paul is getting at. Once we see Jesus for who he really is, we should see others in a new light, no longer by human standards. What does it mean to regard someone by human standards? *He’s annoying. She gets on my nerves. I don’t like her politics.* Those things seem rather petty in the light of faith, don’t they? Unfortunately, we all know our judgments go deeper than that. We judge others by their education, the color of their skin, their status, their sex or sexual identity, how much money they have or don’t have (at least what we *think* they have). What would it mean to no longer regard people by human standards? *No more evaluating. No more labeling. No more “isms” of any kind.* What if we could learn to see everyone around us as reflections of God’s image? There isn’t a person among us who doesn’t claim to love our neighbor as ourselves. And yet our innermost thoughts betray us. Our hidden life is incongruous with our public professions of faith.

This is precisely the reason Paul grounds our calling in God’s grace. We have been transformed by grace and are still being transformed by grace. “Therefore, whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; see, everything has become new!” Once we are in Christ, we are forever changed.

What was before is no longer. Everything is new. The verbs are in perfect tense, signaling that the transformation that takes place is ongoing. The old things became new. They are continuing to become new. We are still a work in progress. We are still on the way to becoming.

We know the grace of God in our lives and, by God's grace, we can see how far we still have to go. But that does not mean that we retreat from our calling until God is finished working on us. We are called to this work, both in spite of our imperfections and because of them. We respond to our calling with humility, identifying and confronting the brokenness of the world while recognizing that only through Christ can that brokenness truly be transformed. God always uses imperfect people to accomplish God's perfect work. We are in good company. We need to remember that we are *ambassadors for Christ*, not saviors ourselves.

If we know the power of God's transforming love in us, we have to believe in that possibility in others. The world we live in is broken, to be sure, but it is not hopeless. We do the work we do because we are people of hope who believe that transformation can happen. *Everything has become new*. We are partners with Christ in the work of drawing the world to God, calling the world to a better, more just, and liberative way. We start right here in ourselves, our church, our community. That's what it means to hold up our corner. And we keep on working as long as it takes.

Maybe this seems like too much. When we read the news or social media, we can easily become discouraged, disenchanted, frustrated, outraged. Sometimes we just want to throw up our hands and say, "I just can't anymore." *How can there be so much willful ignorance and hatred in the world? Why is there so much fear and misunderstanding? How do we stand against those who continue to spread false information just to sow chaos and disorder? How do we stand up for truth in a society that has rendered the whole concept of truth meaningless?*

Pause. Breathe. Take a step back. Remember who you are in Christ. We no longer regard others from a human point of view. Whoever is in Christ is a new creation. We cannot heal what we hate. It takes love – and a whole lot of patience and determination – to bring transformation to the world. Remember – those gifts come from God, not us. Only by reflecting God's love can we accomplish the ministry of reconciliation. *Love is the goal*.

Can we really change the world through love? We have been reconciled to God. We have been and are still being made new. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation. "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*." Friends, there is hope for the world, and it is us. Hope is here and now. We have been and are being reconciled to God and one another, equipped for our mission to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. This is the work of faith. As I was reminded in my devotional reading this week, "mountains are not moved by logistical wizardry, but by faith. And if there is going to be a new creation, some of the mountains will have to go."<sup>2</sup> By God's grace, may it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Casey Thompson. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year C, Volume 2. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (2009), 114.