

2 Corinthians 5:16-21
We Are Ambassadors for Christ
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1-24-16

There was an interesting social experiment that went viral recently. Two young women each took turns sitting quietly on a mall bench: one, a young mother discretely nursing her newborn child; the other, a young lady of similar age sitting quietly but wearing a low cut shirt. The responses these two received were tragic and discouraging to say the least. One received leering sideways glances; the other, a young mother offering her child the most natural and intimate gift she can provide her child, was met with scorn, chastised for what she was doing.

We are surrounded by a culture that has been shown an image of what is true and beautiful and real that is false, distorted. In short, we have exchanged the natural for the unnatural, real for imitation. And this is only one example, we could very easily come up with many more examples.

This morning, we are continuing a series of messages in which we have asked the questions: Where are we? and Where are we going? I've deliberately chosen two texts from 2 Kings and 2 Corinthians because of the powerful truth they tell us about who we are, and the practical and down to earth wisdom they lay out for us as a church community.

What was troubling about this experiment was not only the double standard on display, but how offended people became when they saw something that embodied the very essence of real and loving—a mother nursing her child. When the truth about us is not known, when people are starving – whether they know it or not – for genuine and authentic life, it's not surprising that witnessing something so real and gentle would cause confusion and disgust.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ offers us a very different metric for valuing life. The Gospel sends us on a countercultural mission to be agents of compassion, mercy, and hope in a world more concerned with success, power, and beauty. For these last two weeks, we have looked at two key questions we must answer if we are going to move forward as a church. The first is where are we now? And the answer to that question I mentioned is that we are people for whom Jesus Christ died and rescued us.

The apostle Paul begins this morning's text with a powerful statement about the meaning of every human life. When Jesus Christ came into our world, as John puts it, when **the Word became flesh**; and carried our sins to the cross, dying for them and putting an end once and for all to sin and death in the world. When this happened, life altogether changed for each of us. Verse 17 puts it this way:

There is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Revelation 21 puts it this way: **Behold I am making all things new.** Not I will make all things new, I AM. God's kingdom is here and moving among us, even now.

Life has altogether changed. And this is true whether the world around us realizes it or not. Last week, I illustrated this point by telling you the story of the four lepers at the gates of Samaria. Looking in on their city that was surrounded by enemy tents on every side, these lepers realized that

there was no hope. If it were up to the people of Samaria to save themselves, they were toast--literally high and dry. Instead, these leprous outcasts took a chance: "Listen fellas, if we go out to the enemy, it's possible that they'll kill us. But if we stay here, we're already dead. Or they may take us in and give us food to eat and water to drink. What have we got to lose?"

So they head out to the enemies, and as they're going, God does something miraculous. God makes the sound of thundering horses and roaring chariots to be heard in the ears of the enemy. And they turn tail and run.

When these lepers arrive at their tents, they find their enemies are gone. There before these lepers were all the food and water and clothing they could ever need. In that moment, God chased the enemy off into the night and has changed the lives of every person languishing away in the city of Samaria. Know it or not, the people of Samaria are rescued, their lives have new meaning, and before them, a future filled with hope. And it's theirs whether they know it or not.

This, my friends, is the amazing news of the Gospel. God intervened on behalf of a starving, broken, helpless, and hopeless people, transforming their reality in an instant—doing it whether they realize it or not. Jesus' death on the cross is that once and for all act that reorders our lives, that transforms our future, and gives new meaning to our present. Theologians call paradigm shift, justification.

A teacher of mine, Dan Migliore, defines justification this way: "God's gracious pardon and acceptance of sinners not on account of their own virtues or good works but solely because of God's sheer grace embodied in Jesus Christ and received by faith. Believers are accounted just not in themselves but in Christ."

Paul tells the believers in Corinth that since this is true, every human being, regardless of their size, shape, color, gender, nationality, and identity is no longer viewed through mere human point of view—your life is new and different because God in Jesus Christ lived and died for you. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. And that's true whether you know it or not; that's true whether you believe it or not. Jesus died for you.

The lepers found this out – they realized that God had altogether changed their reality – and the first thing they did was gorge themselves on the spoils of their new found freedom. The danger of so many churches, and why as a whole we are struggling is that like these lepers, we have found good news. But we are fearful, anxious, stuck. We've found good news for us, but what happens if we leave this good thing and go out there to the city?

But as I closed last week's message, I showed you verse nine from chapter 7 in which the lepers look at one another and say: **"What we are doing is wrong. This is a day of good news; if we are silent and wait until the morning light, we will be guilty, therefore let's go and tell the king's household."** But what if they don't believe us? This is the question that keeps so many of us paralyzed with inaction. What if they don't believe us? That's not up to us.

In the second half of this morning's passage, Paul gives us our job description as people who have received good news.

In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself... So—here is the turning point of this passage where Paul gives us our direction. So, we are *ambassadors* for Christ.

Paul gives us a picture of what our mission is as God's people: we are to be ambassadors. Notice what we are given here is not a title, but an action. As Christ's beloved and justified people, you are given a name and a meaning, but you're not given a status. This is where so many in the church simply get it wrong.

An ambassador is: an official representative of a sovereign, who is sent on a mission to a foreign land.

This, my friends, is where we are going, or put another way, where we are sent. We are Christ's ambassadors gathered here at the corner of Miami and Hill and sent out to all corners of this county. And what I'd like to do to bring this back and make this metaphor stick in our minds is look closely and dissect this definition and tell you what I believe it looks like here and now.

One of our core values is that we will be a place that shares this love with all generations. We will seek to be an intergenerational church. We will honor the legacy of those who have gone before us, and we will bless the generation that follows. That is something we do, through our commitment to raising up all these kids. But I will say that as more come, more help is needed. And so, if we are going to raise up that next generation and represent Christ to them, we may need to find others—not their parents—who will care for and nurture these kids. We can be ambassadors for Christ to parents with young children by giving them an hour a week of worship time just to be close to God.

And in the same way, we can represent our sovereign to the elder generation by seeking them out for companionship and friendship. One area that I am particularly interested in is offering live worship through the blessing of the internet to people in our local nursing homes. I tell you the capacity for us to share good news beyond these walls, with the help of a little bit of modern technology, is limitless.

An ambassador is someone who is a representative of another, someone who communicates the values and essence of another. When the United States sends out her ambassadors, they don't go with the intention of colonizing; they go to Canada or Britain or Japan and they are a present living embodiment of what America stands for, her values, her culture.

This ought to give us great hope. Wabash Presbyterian does not exist for our own good, we don't define our purpose, Jesus does that for us. We represent him to the families and people we live among. I believe that the way we can represent our sovereign is to do what our bulletin says we're here to do: to Love People with the Heart of Christ in the Heart of Wabash.

But do you notice in the definition of an ambassador that Paul says we are sent to a foreign land. We are not called to be concierges for the faithful here, but ambassadors for the God we meet here, out there, beyond the walls of this building. That means that we are called beyond the walls of this church.

Now, I know that is not an easy thing. But here is the truth of the message: we are people who have been reconciled to God, justified by faith, and are now the glad and joyful recipients of that good news. And Jesus said to his disciples in John 20, **“Peace to you, the father sent me, now I'm**

sending you,” then he says in Acts 1:8, **“you will be my witnesses.”** We aren’t his campaign managers, we aren’t his promoters or case managers, we are witnesses—people who as they go about their lives witness to and resemble in word and in deed the one who sends them.

This year, we are going to give you new opportunities to bear witness to Jesus outside these walls. In a few months, you will have the opportunity to receive comprehensive training and become a mentor to an elementary student at OJ Neighbours Elementary School. Through your kindness and generosity of time and energy, by loving these kids, we will bear witness to the love God has for us in Christ Jesus.

We also believe that as followers of Christ, we are called to be participants in the local square, which is why we are working on new and creative ways to leverage media and technology to invite people into a conversation about faith and life in a way that is intelligent, imaginative, creative, and kind. I’m really excited about this because, what studies have shown is that the public perceptions of many Christians and Churches is that they are judgmental, uncaring, hypocritical. And by meeting people on neutral ground and inviting them into thoughtful and compassionate conversations, we have the chance to be faithful witnesses to the truth of who Jesus is.

1 Peter 3:15 says, **“we as Christians should be ready to give an account of the hope that is in us,”** and to be gentle and kind in our approach. As the Church, we don’t have our own agenda, we have marching orders, we have a commissioning. Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul uses these beautiful images of what we are. They each imply one very powerful image: that we exist for the sake of...

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. (2 Corinthians 2)

You are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Corinthians 3)

As ambassadors for Christ, our only purpose is to live with that hope on the tips of our tongues. And by our lives, others will know that God is the one reconciling, God is the one who brings people to that joyful knowledge that Jesus is King, God is the one who takes congregations of regular people like you and me and says *Get ready, because if you say yes to this, just watch what I do.*

We have been given what is ultimately true in this world, that God’s love and mercy and justice and grace define our lives and that we no longer have go on taking advantage of and consuming one another. If you go back to the first few verses I read from 2 Kings 6, when the women were so desperate for food that they were willing to do the unconscionable, and Elisha, the man of God came by and said by this time tomorrow, you will be able to buy more food than you can imagine for less money than you can comprehend.

In a world that is starved for meaning, starved for purpose, where truth and value is exchanged for its opposite, God says watch what I do, then you, lepers, go live as though it’s true.

Are you willing to go back to the city where people are starving and dying of thirst? Are you?

Eric Liddel story...

Quote: “It took the Olympic Games to teach Eric that God intended to use his phenomenal athletic ability to bring people to him. And it was Eric’s refusal to run on Sunday, sacrificing an almost certain gold medal, that taught the world there was no hypocrisy in this world-famous Christian follower. Eric also revealed the value he placed on obedience to God: he ranked it above the greatest treasures the world could offer.”