

## Sermon: Ministers of Reconciliation

This passage is kind of special because in it we have one of only a few instances in scripture where the gospel message is explained outright. Here, Paul presents it in terms of our need for reconciliation. We lead lives that are broken and in need of reconciliation, both to God and to others, and God has made such a reconciliation possible through the work of Jesus Christ. Five times in three verses, Paul utilizes some form of the word “reconcile.” Clearly, the theme of reconciliation is Paul’s focus in this passage. He even begs the Corinthians to be reconciled to God. However, I think in writing this passage, Paul is also looking for another kind of reconciliation as well, that is his own reconciliation to the church of Corinth. Truthfully, I doubt that Paul even viewed the reconciliation with God and the reconciliation among people as two separate issues at all. Rather, I suspect Paul recognized 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 at the same time. The two can’t be separated.

Paul’s appeal for reconciliation arises out of a complex, messy human situation. To put it mildly, the Corinthian church was Paul’s problem child. He had founded the church and since moved on. But even from a distance, Paul was consistently receiving news of sin and strife and turmoil in the Corinthian church. There were all kinds of fractures and divisions within the church. Stories of lawsuits among believers, conflicts between Jews and Gentiles, and even the neglect and oppression of the poor in the community reached Paul. There were also several ideological fractures among Corinthian believers. Many of the people in the church even turned on Paul. Indeed, there was a LOT of ugliness in the Corinthian church. Everyone was turning

on everyone else, treating each other so badly that their relationship to each other and to God was being torn to shreds.

This is why Paul begins this passage the way that he does. He starts by explaining that he used to think about people the same way that the Corinthians do, deciding their value based on outward appearances, but he doesn't do that anymore. Paul uses Christ as an example of this concept. To understand this illustration, we must remember how Paul viewed Christ before he was converted on the road to Damascus. He believed that, in life, Christ was an uneducated false teacher, hailing from a back water town. And in Christ's death, well, as a Pharisee, Paul would have known that the book of Deuteronomy says, "cursed are all who hang on a tree." But it was no secret that Paul was a changed man. Once he got to know Christ, he recognized him not as a cursed man, but as God's own Son, who boldly took the first step in reconciling people to God. As the one who would let Nothing, not sin, not death, not hatred or ugliness or pain or prejudice, not separation or isolation or selfishness or pride or anything else on earth or above the earth or under the earth to stand between people and himself. No, Jesus went all the way in identifying with our failings, so much so that he became them as he was nailed to that cross. As a result of his changed view of Christ, Paul is no longer able to judge any other human being by the outward appearances that were causing divisions within the Corinthian church; he could only regard each person as someone for whom Christ died. Paul's view had changed so much that he could even say to this church in Corinth, a church that had bickered with him and challenged him, that God is powerful enough not only to reconcile them to himself, but also to transform even them into "the righteousness of God."

Now, before we start picking up the rocks to stone the Corinthians, we've got to find ourselves in this story. If we think about it, we're probably all WAY more like the Corinthians

than any of us would ever want to admit. We all look at each other from a human point of view. We all think, “well, this person is of roughly the same age, class, stage in life, culture, political and theological persuasion as me. Certainly, we can be friends.” Or conversely, “This person really bothers me. I don’t want to be around them” Or “that person is too old or too young to be a significant part my life.” Or even, “What could I possibly have in common with the person who lives in the wrong part of town?” Our lives are so broken in so many different ways. We fail to find healing in our families, allowing tensions to grow and grow. We let our wounds fester after someone we love hurts us, refusing to take the first step to make things right. We wait for others to ask for forgiveness before we are willing to give it. We take our frustrations out on the people we care for the most. And we cut off our relationship with our God by chasing after prestige and wealth and all the right credentials to become well-respected citizens. When things go well, we pat ourselves on the back and when they go poorly, we shake our tiny fists at God. We look for justice before we look for mercy, hoping to help ourselves to feel more secure in our own situation. Yes, there are so many ways that we are just like those Corinthians. And we too stand sorely in need of reconciliation both to God and to one another.

Fortunately for us, as Paul has already explained, God has done all of the work in reconciling us to himself. HE initiated the reconciliation, even though we were the offending party, and HE gave everything he had to bring us back into good standing with him. Christ simply refuses to allow anything to block us from being in relationship to him! Now, since we have been reconciled to God, we are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. ANYONE who has been reconciled to God is now a part of this ministry. So we can’t leave it to the people with the degrees, like me and Ben and Steve. We can’t leave it to the person in the next pew who we think is holier than us. We can’t leave it to the more pious or the more seasoned Christians. This

ministry belongs to YOU. At some point, we all must go from being recipients of reconciliation to being ministers of reconciliation. What we have received from God is meant to be shared. But what does that mean for us? For Paul, the ministry of reconciliation must follow the pattern of Christ, who allowed nothing to stand between us and his love, not even our sin! Thus reconciliation is not simply something to be desired; it has become an imperative. If, in our relationship to God, we find that our trespasses are not held against us, we too are challenged to reach across the boundaries and barriers that separate us, whether due to sins against us, misunderstandings, or misconceptions. We're to be ministers of reconciliation to our families, to our acquaintances, to our enemies, to strangers, to people we think are so different from us we could never share our lives with them.

So, we're all called to do it, but how does one become a minister of reconciliation, an ambassador for Christ? Quite simply, it's in taking the first step and reaching out. I remember the first time I received the call to be a minister of reconciliation. It was on the first day of a course entitled "ministry to internationals." As I perused the syllabus, one requirement of the course grabbed my attention. I was to get an English partner, meaning I needed to find a person from another country who needed to practice speaking English, and use my native tongue to their advantage. Frankly, at the time, the prospect frightened me a bit. I mean, sure, I wanted to learn how to talk to internationals, just in case I were to ever run into one. But truthfully, I was much more comfortable with leaving up the boundaries and barriers that separated me from them. The prospect of seeking out a relationship with someone from a completely different world than mine was WAY beyond my comfort zone. I kept wondering "what could I possibly share with this person from a different world?" We won't like the same music or eat the same foods or have similar upbringings or cultural values or even speak the same language! The relationship was

bound to be forced and awkward. And I was totally convinced that I was going to commit some kind of cultural faux pas. I was NOT looking forward to this assignment.

But then, I met Natsuko, a Japanese student in a woodworking course I was also taking at a different school. Within the first few weeks of class, I worked up enough courage to ask her if she wanted to grab dinner with me, mind you the only reason I did was because I had to for my class assignment, and mind you, I thought the assignment was a dumb one. I certainly didn't expect to become a minister of reconciliation through it. But what started as a class assignment became a friendship and then a ministry! I was glad that my assignment had forced me to take the first step toward reconciliation. And what was even more astounding to me was that Natsuko and her friends became ministers to me. Soon, Natsuko went from the one for whom I was tearing down barriers to being the one who was ripping them down for me. And before I knew it, I was in with the Japanese crowd. And the people I met were messengers from Christ to me, as we shared our cultural differences and our human similarities. They drew me into their world and welcomed me, and I could see how God moved in and through them. And before I knew it, there was a small contingent of girls with whom I attended a Japanese-speaking church each week. Now, I had no idea what was going on, I think it was a Lutheran church. But afterwards, they'd come out with great questions, like "who was Israel?" They forced me to think about my faith and who God is to me. And I did my best to fumble through an answer in language that they would understand. But my answers weren't really all that important. What was important to them was that in me, they saw someone who had reached out to them, and worked to tear down the walls of separation and they did the same for me. And in that aspect of our relationship, Christ was present.

What's even more amazing is that Natsuko inadvertently became a minister of reconciliation herself. Each week, Natsuko would tell her grandmother what she learned in church, and one day, Natsuko informed me that her grandmother had found a home church in Japan. There was a little old lady halfway around the world who was learning about the love of Christ because I reached out to a girl in my woodworking class. I didn't know it at the time, but I had unwittingly taken up the ministry of reconciliation by simply being there and taking the first step toward reconciliation, to start to tear down barriers that I had previously been happy to leave in place. It felt safer and more comfortable that way. But as it turns out, the safe and the comfortable is not what God calls us to in the ministry of reconciliation. Rather, it is a call to radical love and dependence. And as we bring others to ourselves, well, we can't help but to share about how Christ has brought us to himself.

So, did our friends the Corinthians, ever take up the ministry of reconciliation? Did they make things right between themselves and with Paul with God? The answer to that question has been lost to history. And honestly, I kind of like it that way. It gives us room to consider what we might do in this, or any other, situation where we still stand in need of reconciliation. For it is in the act of reconciliation, says Paul, that we may become the righteousness of God.