September 30, 2012

**Ambassadors for Christ**
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Isn’t it a great delight to have the Mark Twain Ringers helping lead worship with us this morning? Wow! We love you all and are so very proud of you and of all you have worked hard to accomplish.

This summer, we followed your tour as you served as our ambassadors to the Olympics. Our Bible reading this morning talks about us all as “ambassadors of Christ.” In that, you are great role models for us. Not only for being part of the Olympics—whose purpose, of course, is help to build a better world through sport practiced in a spirit of peace, excellence, friendship, and respect. But also you are ambassadors just by coming and worshipping here in this United Methodist Church. I bet if I asked how many of you are United Methodists, not many hands would go up. But—I also know that you feel at home here. That you feel loved here, and appreciated. We make take this for granted, but we shouldn’t. I’m old enough to remember the days when Protestants and Catholics didn’t worship in each other’s churches and carried around a lot of stereotypes and weird ideas about each other.

But look at us this morning. It takes an ambassador to break down barriers that separate people. It takes an ambassador to focus on what unites us, not on what divides us. It takes an ambassador to want to get to know other people who may seem different on the outside but who really are all pretty much the same inside. God makes us all. God loves us all. A real ambassador gets that and lives it out. And that’s what you are doing, when you’re worshipping here and when you’re travelling around ringing your bells. So if any of you want to work for the State Department or at the United Nations, go for it. You already have all the basic skills and you’ll be helping to make this world a much better place.

Let me just say here that the Apostle Paul was using the term ambassador in a very special way in the verses we hear this morning. He’s writing to a congregation that in many ways was much like our own. Corinth was in Greece—the home of the original Olympic games. It was a major center of travel and commerce. It was a port city and a regional capitol. It was made up of all kinds of peoples, races, cultures, --just like cities you know—Los Angeles, London, Paris. And, within the church itself, it consisted of new Christians who were all over the map in their understandings of just what this new faith was all about. And, wouldn’t you know, because of all these differences, they didn’t all get along. They quarreled. They put down those who were different from them. And into this mix comes Paul with a mission to set things right.

Paul says----you’re not getting it. That’s the old way of doing things. You don’t get that we are all new creations in Christ. All that old stuff has gone away. Everything has become new. This is a gift that God gives to us. Here’s how it works—first, God has created a new relationship between God and us through Christ. God has reconciled himself to us, Paul says. And so, then, God entrusts us with that
same ministry of reconciliation. We are now God’s own ambassadors, trusted by God to carry on this work of reconciliation so that barriers might be broken down, and lives made new, and a whole new future become possible because of what we ourselves know of Christ living in us. A whole new future because of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

You know, sometimes we get what it means to be a Christian all wrong. We think it’s a label or an identity we claim—like Catholic or Protestant, like Anglo or Salvadoreño or Oaxacan. Even Jesus had to show the disciples that he was so much more than any label they could put on him, as Pastor Robert reminded us two Sundays ago.

But Paul is trying to say convey something really different—that being a Christian is not about a label, but a way of living and believing. It’s a new way of understanding ourselves as something brand new when we put on Christ. It changes how we treat people, how we think about others. What’s at stake here is not just calling ourselves Christian, but about the kind of Christian we will be. In Christ, God calls us to be his own ambassadors who show the world what it means to build bridges, to make friends, to work for peace.

Sometimes this work comes at a high price. There are those who give their lives for this work. One such ambassador was our U.S. Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, who was killed in Benghazi, Libya a couple weeks ago.

Chris Stevens was the first U.S. Ambassador killed in the line of duty since 1979. His senseless death stunned our nation and particularly our diplomatic corps. It was made all the more poignant by the fact that Chris Stevens truly loved the people of Libya. He served in the Peace Corps in the region and fell in love with it. He spoke Arabic and French. After the end of the Gaddafi regime, Stevens went to Libya in May 2012, sent by our State Department as Special Representative to the National Transitional Council, to be of assistance to the new government and to the Libyan people.

He became friends, as ambassador, with ordinary Libyans. He ate in their homes and played sports with their kids. He encouraged his staff to get out into the community and build real relationships with the people. He set up a scholarship program for promising Libyan students to be able to pursue their education. He was, by all accounts, funny, out-going, genuine, and deeply committed. A law-school classmate said of him: “Chris was open to learning from anyone and to teaching them without regard to a person’s religion, race, or background...he seemed to really relish opportunities to get to know other people. He combined genuine optimism with deep sincerity...the world would be a much better place if we were all more like Chris Stevens.”

Chris Stevens was a real ambassador—he built bridges, he made friends, he worked for peace. He lived what he believed. But the violence of the region, a violence fueled by hatred and extremism, overcame his efforts and claimed his life. As a Catholic priest wrote after his death: “Christopher is a name of ancient Greek roots meaning “Christ-bearer”…May Islam and Christianity be able to flourish one day alongside each other in northern Africa, the land of St. Augustine… may Christopher Stevens, whose name bears such a burden of destiny...even in--and perhaps mysteriously because of--his tragic death, be an instrument for that.” Jesus called us to lose our life in order to save it.

The Apostle Paul could not have envisioned quite the kind of world Ambassador Stevens worked in, nor the challenges and possibilities of interfaith reconciliation. Yet nevertheless he could describe for us Christians of our day what it means to be made new in Christ, what it means to be “Christ-bearers” in our time. As Eugene Peterson translates these verses in The Message: “God has given us the task of telling everyone what God is doing. We’re Christ’s representatives. God uses us to persuade
men and women to drop their differences and enter into God’s work of making things right between them.”

All of us who have baptized into the life and death of Christ Jesus become Christ-bearers, Christ’s representatives, God’s ambassadors in this world in which we live, this world God so loves. For its sake, for its salvation and wholeness, God has entrusted us to carry the Good News with us wherever we go and to make it real in our lives and in the lives of all we meet.

As Kurt said last Sunday, we are to put out a welcome mat in front of our hearts and become God’s representatives of God’s Kingdom here on earth as in heaven, a Kingdom in which there is love and grace for all, safety and plenty for all. A Kingdom where the weak need never fear the strong. A Kingdom where our differences are a mark not of suspicion and fear but of the beauty and wonder and gift of God’s good creation. A Kingdom where we enter into God’s work of making things right amongst one another.

We glimpse a little bit of that vision here each week when we gather as God’s people. We see a little bit of that vision in the faces of these beautiful youth who are already ambassadors to the world. We see that vision in the Ambassador Stevenses of the world who dedicate their lives to the work of understanding and peace.

Growing ever closer to the God who draws us near, leaning on the everlasting arms, let us remain on the side of love, as Robert said, dedicating ourselves to be ambassadors of that love, Christ-bearers, signs of the Kingdom—agents of healing and reconciliation, channels of grace, champions of hope, makers of peace. May we be the hope the world longs to see, creating a new future, a future full of possibilities yet undreamed.

AMEN.

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