

Septembr 25, 2016
2 Corinthians 5:18-21
2 Corinthians 6: 1-4a
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“Ambassadors for Christ”

Good morning! I’m going to begin this morning with something I try not to do very often. It’s probably not the best policy for public speaking. In fact, if I were on the national presidential debate stage-- which I am not, praise the Lord -- my advisors would probably tell me that this is a bad idea. I want to begin with a caution to you, but it’s a caution for myself, as well. Some of what I say this morning may make us uncomfortable. I don’t know what my popularity rating was before, but this may not help it out much. I want you to know that although it is not my personality to be confrontational, I believe in what I’m saying, and I believe it applies to me at least as much as it applies to any of you. I also believe that being comfortable is not our highest calling as Christians. So I’m telling you advance that this may be uncomfortable, because it is for me, but I’m not apologizing for what I’m going to say. Are we straight on that?

Our scripture today is from 2 Corinthians. As you know, the original letter from the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth was written as one long document, and the division into chapters and verses was made later by scholars for the convenience of readers. I find the break between chapter 5 and Chapter 6 a little awkward; I’ve chosen the verses at the end of Chapter 5 through the beginning of Chapter 6. I’d like to focus on this idea of being “ambassadors for Christ” who are charged with a ministry of reconciliation. This come from Chapter 5 verses 18-20. Let’s unpack the word ambassador a bit. Ambassadors come from the world of government and politics. An ambassador is an official representative of a government. Usually the highest ranking diplomat; someone who lives and works in a country that is not their home country. Ambassadors have usually spent years living in the country to which they’re assigned, learning the

culture and the language and how to communicate effectively. The primary duties of an ambassador are to protect the citizens of their own country, to support prosperity at home and abroad, and to work for peace. Ambassadors are not rulers. They aren't kings or presidents or even prime ministers. They are representatives of the rulers whom they serve. I bet some of you have already figured out where this is going.

Paul says it straight out: We are ambassadors for Christ. God is making an appeal through us. It's God's message we are carrying. Here is that message of good news: God wants the whole world to be made whole again. God wants the world to be back in line, to match up with how God created it to be. Paul uses the word reconcile: we shouldn't be intimidated by this as a theological concept. As some of you know -- way better than I do -- reconciliation is a term from accounting, too. It means the same thing here. Reconciling accounts means getting them to match up, having one statement correspond with another. And, at least in my very limited accounting experience, reconciliation rarely just takes care of itself: it takes some effort, especially if accounts have gone for a while unattended, reconciliation may take significant time and effort.

It's no different with relationships. Reconciliation means tending to the things that are out of alignment. It works best when we work at it regularly, before things get wildly out of control: when we spend time on the relationships which are important to us, when we deal with conflict honestly and directly and as soon as we're aware of it, rather than trying to deny it or ignore it, or hope that it will just go away. Relationships reconcile best when both sides are invested in a positive outcome. In fact, in order to have a positive relationship, it has to be positive for both sides. A relationship that feels great to me and crappy to you is not a great relationship.

Paul tells us that Christ is the way that God has chosen to reconcile the world. That God chose to send his sinless Son to become our sin so that we could become righteous. In other words, Christ cleared the books for us so that our debt of sin is zero. There is no way we could have reconciled that account on our own, no way we could make ourselves righteous except through the grace of Christ. And Paul says, "So don't accept the grace of God in vain!" You've been

given a second chance, don't blow it. This is the time to act, this is the day of salvation. Let's start by not making reconciliation more difficult for anyone else. This is same formula which is given to physicians; it applies to any healer: First, do no harm.

Our first charge is to not keep others people from coming to know Christ. This is not as simple as it sounds. Hypocrisy and judgement are obstacles to our ministry. Trying to pass myself off as perfect when I know darn well that I'm not is a much bigger obstacle to my witness than acknowledging my faults. Deciding someone is not worth my time and effort because of their lifestyle choices may be a greater loss for me than it is for them. Ignoring a guest at Creekside because you're an introvert and don't know what to say may feel more comfortable to you, but what if the guest gets the message that you aren't friendly, or don't like them? Worse, what if you just can't be bothered to extend yourself for a guest? What message does that send? First, do no harm. Don't put obstacles in anyone's way. It's difficult enough for a guest to be out of their comfort zone without making them feel like their presence is inconvenient for us.

I want to get back to the idea of being an ambassador for Christ, because that's the next step, the active step in the process. Ambassadors actually engage in the country where they are sent to be. Often they live and work from an embassy: a post that is built and maintained for diplomatic work. This church is our embassy: important work goes on here, we host functions and invite folks to be part of them, administrative stuff happens here. But our work as ambassadors has to go out there, in the country to which we've been assigned. The relationships we have with family, the friendships with neighbors and classmates and co-workers and whomever, that is where we have been sent. That is why we are sent. As ambassadors for Christ our primary purpose is not to fill up the embassy, it's to invite people into the kingdom of God. Just as God sent Christ so that we could be reconciled to God, we have been given the ministry of reconciliation so that other people can experience the good news of healing and wholeness. Of course the church is a *part* of that ministry, but the church is not the *purpose* of that ministry. The purpose of our ministry is get ourselves and our world back in line with how God intended it to be.

Being an ambassador is not an easy job. We have to understand both our homeland and the country to which we are sent. The rules may not be the same. In the kingdom of God, it is the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and the peacemakers who are blessed. In that country, not so much. Usually it's the wealthy and the powerful and the aggressive who seem to be doing OK. We have to be able to relate to people from that country without giving up our identity as Christ's people. We have to be winsome enough as Christians that we don't put up obstacles to Christ, and enthusiastic enough to let folks know that the good news of Christ is for them, too.

So I'm going to ask you a set of questions: many of these are taken from the pages of *Outrageous and Courageous*, the book our small groups are studying. I don't want you to answer out loud or to raise your hand, but I do want you to take these seriously and answer for yourself. Not every outrageous or courageous act is for everyone, but I believe every Christian is called to be uncomfortable or to take a risk at some time in their life. Please think about how you are being challenged to be an ambassador for Christ at this time, and in this place. You may notice kind of hierarchy in these questions. That's no accident. Would you:

- Leave your family and your profession in this country for a long-term assignment as an ambassador for Christ in another country?**
- Leave your family and your work in this country for a short-term assignment for Christ in another country?**
- Take time away from commitments at home to work on a service project to rebuild a community in the United States or another country?**
- Use your own money to go on a service project?**
- Give your own money so that someone else could go on a service project?**
- Give your own money for ministries at Creekside Church? Would you commit to and communicate an amount so leaders could plan?**
- Volunteer to serve at a Creekside event for our community, even if you'd do it differently if you were in charge?**

- **Talk to someone in a grocery line about Jesus Christ? Invite them to come to church?**
- **Hand a bottle of cold water to a sweaty cross country runner?**
- **Talk to a friend or family member about Jesus Christ? Invite them to come to church?**
- **Step away from a committee or responsibility at Creekside so you have more time to interact with people outside of church?**
- **Support the ministries of other folks at Creekside, or at least not put obstacles in their way?**
- **Park in a parking space further away from the door at church, so there are convenient open spaces for guests?**
- **Sit in a different seat in the Worship Center so there are convenient open seats for guests?**
- **Excuse yourself from a conversation on Sunday morning in order to greet a guest?**
- **Greet someone in the name of Christ, even if you don't know them?**

I'm not suggesting that you have to answer YES to all of these questions in order to be an ambassador for Christ. There's not a magic number of YES answers that qualifies you as a great Christian. There are plenty of fine questions which aren't on this list. But if you could not affirm any of these statements, I would gently and respectfully ask you to consider why you're here. It's great to be here to visit the embassy, but the work of an ambassador for Christ should send us out into the country out there, as well. Amen.