

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
June 24, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

2 Corinthians 5:14-21 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. **15** And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. **17** Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! **18** All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: **19** that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. **20** We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. **21** God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

“Reconciled Reconcilers”

“Well, I’ve decided I’m going to file for divorce.” It was a relief just for Tom to hear the words coming out of his mouth. He’d been stewing about it, throwing around all the possible directions he could go for years now. It sounds like a cliché, but over the past few years, he and his wife had just drifted apart. Ok, there’s a lot more to it than that. They had always had their differences. They never felt like a perfect match, if there was such a thing. But a significant drift had taken place.

Only a few years after they had gotten married, she started to get suspicious. He was working late more than she thought normal. He stopped checking in with her when he went on business trips. Of course, to him the thought of cheating on her was ridiculous. So he decided not to even dignify her suspicions with any kind of response. He was determined not to play her games. Which meant he didn’t do anything to try to put her mind at ease or eliminate legitimate reasons for suspicion.

Personality differences turned into palpable tensions. There was just no warmth between them when they were together. Not like they sat down and made a conscious plan, but they each ended up not making any effort to contribute to the happiness of the other. No joy for me. No joy for you. You won’t take care of me, then I’ll leave you to fend for yourself.

Not only were they cold and unwelcoming toward each other, but they each contributed to the deterioration of the relationship. He knew she was complaining about him when she was with her girlfriends. She would have been right to assume he made plans for himself without any consideration of her. This tension, this constant hostility just kept growing and getting worse. And so he decided he wasn’t going to put up with it any more. He wasn’t going to live his life that way. And so it finally came to the point where he decided to tell someone about it.

Tom had gotten closer with one of his co-workers over the past few months. Not like they were sharing their feelings with each other. But they had gotten to the point where they could do more than just discuss issues at work and talk about sports. And so when Tom had decided to stop obsessing and actually do something about his broken marriage, Rich seemed like the right person to tell. It had just become obvious that it was the most practical step to take. He just needed to say out loud what he's been saying to himself for way too long.

But Rich didn't give him the answer he expected when Tom informed him of his plans to get a divorce. "Sounds like you're in quite a mess," was the response he got. "Yeah," Tom continued to outline all the issues and flaws in his soon-to-be ex-wife. "No," interrupted Rich, "I mean you. Sounds like you're quite a mess." The reaction hit Tom with the subtlety of a 2"x4". Not only was it rude and unsympathetic, but it hurt too. Rich kept going: "The way you treat your wife is just a symptom of how you look at other people. That just reveals a flawed way of looking at yourself."

Tom was thrown for a loop. He'd never had someone be so blunt with him. But then he started thinking about his other relationships. It wasn't just the tension and hostility he felt in his home. The new guys hired at work just didn't have the same work ethic. They couldn't stay on track and take pride in their work. Then there was the new batch of neighbors. They were, well, different. They played their music so loud. And he couldn't understand any of the words. Over the past few years, he started to feel like they were surrounding him, making him feel like the misfit who didn't belong. And he resented it.

Rich could tell Tom was deep in thought. But Rich wasn't done piling on: "And if you think it's hopeless, you're right. For you it is." Tom sat stunned. It started to sink in. Maybe if Tom had issues in his relationship with his wife and with people at work and with people who lived in his neighborhood, maybe the problem wasn't everyone else. Maybe he was the problem.

He even found a pretty profound diagnosis for his issues: **"So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"** (2 Corinthians 5:16,17) The worldly way is to look at people on a purely surface level. The natural, default way of seeing someone is to see them as things rather than people. They become objects we can use and exploit and get something from them. And there is even a purely superficial way of looking at Christ. We approach him with the attitude of what we can get from him. We treat him like a genie whose lamp we can rub and extract a few wishes from him. We might go a little deeper and try to see how Christ could contribute to our lives by providing rules and guidance for better performance, instructions and patterns for becoming better versions of ourselves. But that is just the old way, the outdated and obsolete perspective for our lives. 2 Corinthians shows us there is a better way. We need a whole change of perspective. A different way of looking at ourselves before we can change the way we see others and repair the important relationships in our lives.

First we need to confront the bigger issue that we share with Tom and every other human being. We suffer from lives that are out of whack with the most important relationship in our lives. Everything in our lives is tainted by a alienation from God. We tend to isolate the problem to people who look like they are in open rebellion against God, people who are stuck in substance abuse or living violent lives. But in our natural state we live in tension and hostility with God. That's why marriage takes so much work. Put two selfish people together, put them in the same space where they will be fighting for their own needs and shake them up with their attempts to dominate the other and repeat the cycle of trying to get more out of life at the expense of the other and you are bound to see explosive situations. They will automatically drift apart because they are like two magnets attracted to what is best for themselves. The relationship will by default be broken because two broken people are being stuck together.

And when we come to grips with the fact that this is rooted in our alienation from God, then we can start to see the solution. 2 Corinthians 5:18,19 tells us: **“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”** Reconciliation with God has to take place before we have any hope of repairing human relationships.

If it is not going to be hopeless, it has to rest on the work of Jesus Christ. This change in human hearts begins and ends with Jesus: **“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”** (2 Corinthians 5:14,15) The only way to look at people differently than what comes naturally to us as human beings is to have Christ change our hearts. Christ showed selfless love to selfish human beings. Christ sacrificed himself to spare us from the consequences of lives lived for ourselves. The death of Jesus Christ is the only solution to save us from lives we naturally embrace and the punishment we deserve.

Paul gives us insight into the mechanics of how that works. He tells us: **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** (2 Corinthians 4:21) Jesus is the only one who has never sinned. He associated with sinners, eating with prostitutes and tax collectors, yet Jesus never caved in to a single temptation during his earthly life. And yet he was made to be sin for us. God placed all the sins of humanity on the sinless of God at the cross. Jesus is our replacement to shoulder our punishment. He is our substitute to be the solution for people who have no way to rescue themselves from certain destruction. It's the worst deal in all of history: Christ gives us his righteousness in exchange for humanity's sinfulness!

What Jesus did 2,000 years ago effects a real change for people today. All the hostility, all the tension that stood between us and God has been overcome. The separation and alienation we experience has been tackled by Jesus himself. Now we enjoy a whole and healthy relationship with God: **“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself**

through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them." (2 Corinthians 4:18,19) God took it upon himself to change our status from enemies to friends. God effected a thorough change in our relationship when Jesus successfully completed his life's mission.

Tom came to realize the harsh reality of his alienation from God led him to find peace with God. The new way of looking at himself as a reconciled child of God allows him to see the people in his life as also reconciled by God: **"So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"** (2 Corinthians 5:16,17) Christ is no longer a guide or teacher. He is the substitute who brings wholeness and healing to my relationship with God. That peace with God is only way to bring peace to his relationships with others. Alienation from God is the most serious dilemma, then reconciliation is the ultimate solution. The reconciled becomes the reconciler.

All around us celebrity power couples break up, wonderful relationships crumble into spats and fights and finger pointing. But God's people know the love of Jesus. We have the love of Jesus. We get to bring this life-changing reality to the people in our lives. 2 Corinthians tells us about our important and influential role in God's kingdom: **"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us."** (2 Corinthians 5:20) Tim Keller, an influential pastor and best-selling author says it this way: "Jesus' sacrificial service to us has brought us into a deep union with him and he with us. And that, Paul says, is the key not only to understanding marriage, but to live it."¹

Some relationships look hopeless. How can you possibly reach someone who is not like you? There are so many differences between people of different races and ethnicities, different ages and income brackets. And yet the reconciliation we have with God through Jesus Christ is the great equalizer. The same Jesus who could rebuke a storm on a lake and command it to be quiet is at work through your role as ambassador. Jesus brought real change for those disciples fearful of nature's worst. Now he uses his power when he uses you to connect with other souls lost and alienated from God. Sharing God's Word, praying for a wayward soul unleashes God's weapons of spiritual warfare. Drawn deeper into a relationship with Go through his Word and prayer, the reconciled Christian is compelled more and more to share God's love.

Marriage, co-workers, neighbors, and even perfect strangers are just projects God gets to work on through his ambassadors. The only way marriage or friendship works is when a forgiven sinner rejoices in the reconciliation we have in Christ and lives selflessly for someone else. When two people are living out Christ's reconciliation at the same time, it is powerful. Your God went to extreme lengths to bring you salvation and challenges his people now to go to extraordinary lengths to bring the truth of the gospel to others. The reconciled become reconcilers. Amen.

¹ Tim Keller. The Meaning of Marriage, p. 42.