

Our Ministry of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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Do you ever think of yourself as an ambassador for Jesus here on Block Island? I might as well be up front in telling you that I want you to see your role as representing Jesus—and that involves urging others to see the new world that the cross of Jesus has created. In my understanding of the gospel, it is an essential part of our calling to follow Jesus that we urge others to follow him, too. Life in a pan-Protestant parish on a live-and-let-live island has not changed that conviction. I have to say that my biggest disappointment in ministry on Block Island has not been making enemies or failing to see numbers grow; the biggest disappointment is not seeing new people coming to faith in Christ and experiencing what it means to have a new life and a new world because they believe in him. I'm a guy who all his ministry has baptized 12-15 new believers every year, and a passage like this one in the lectionary for today brings the joy of seeing people reconciled to God back to me.

I know that some of you don't feel comfortable talking to people about faith in Christ. Some of you may be positively opposed to it as a form of arrogance or spiritual imperialism. I want to suggest from Paul's thoughts in this passage that you have misunderstood the task to which we are called. For the past century at least "evangelism" has been equated with "salesmanship." My first experiences with evangelism were with learning a memorized sales pitch and walking strangers through a little booklet which called for a decision—closing the sale—at the end. The way I was taught to respond to arguments against the points I was making were similar to techniques a car salesman might use to convince me that I really did need that new car. I have to say that even with that approach, some good things happened—I assume because God was willing to use a naïve kid with relatively good intentions even though I did sell the program more because it was my job than because I was living in a new world I wanted others to see.

I suspect that the reason you don't want to explain the gospel or talk about your personal faith is that you see evangelism as selling. You are trying to get people to buy a product they don't know they need—selling ice to Eskimos—and that is just not you, not your gift. But Jesus is not asking you to be a salesman. Neither is Paul. A few pages back in 2 Corinthians (2:17), Paul says "We are not peddlers of God's word like so many." *The Message* paraphrases that as "We don't take God's Word, water it down, and then take it to the streets to sell it cheap."

We have no product to sell. We aren't looking for members or donors. We are not just signing people up so we can say we did it. Paul has a completely different way of thinking of his task. Here he describes himself as an ambassador, but not an ambassador asking the rulers or citizens of another country to submit. He is an ambassador announcing that peace has already been achieved, that reconciliation is a fact, and that fact has created a new world to live in.

We are not given the job of convincing people that God is rightly mad at them. We are given the joy of announcing that God is not angry, but has taken care of all the things that broke the relationship between humans and the divine—taken care of it by what happened when Jesus took all the evil and pain of human brokenness on himself when he hung on a cross. Here's the summary of the gospel for Paul: "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them."

The striking thing for me is that the reconciliation has already happened. God is not waiting for us to do anything. Maybe he got tired of that. God just took the initiative and said "OK, I'll just take all

the pain of this divorce between me and the world on myself, and let's start all over again. I love you, OK? I'm holding nothing against you. Let's not live like enemies, but as friends."

It's not just in this one passage. It's Paul's basic stance that he is to announce good news, that we have already been made right with God. He uses the language of reconciliation in Romans 5: "While we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son." "We have now *received* reconciliation" (5:11-12). Do you see the massive difference between that and telling people "You need to be reconciled to God?" That's the stance of most religions: that we have to solve the problem of God. The gospel is that God has already solved it, and all we have to do is to live in that reality.

The way I learned evangelism was more like "You are currently alienated from God, but if you accept Christ as Savior and Lord you will be reconciled to God." That is, I suppose, a kind of sales pitch, asking you to do something. But Paul says here that we are given this message to announce: that reconciliation is accomplished, that Jesus has made peace for us. That's why they call it evangelism—*eu* for good, *angelion* for message, good news.

This is not just a personal deal, either. It's a cosmic deal. In Christ God was reconciling *the world* to himself. Paul assumes that the whole world was in a state of alienation from God; in his religion he traces that to the fall of Adam. But honestly you don't even have to go there if you don't want to. The point is that somehow through our choices as humans the whole world order has moved away from what God intended for the world. But now through what God has done in Christ—removing the problem of sin, doing away with alienation, giving birth to a new humanity—there is a whole new creation. If we are "in Christ"—that is, if through faith we understand ourselves to be one with Jesus and part of this new humanity—then we are part of a new creation, a whole new world in which God and his creation are reunited.

We do have a choice. Reconciliation has already happened in reality, but we can choose to live in the new world or in the old world. It is not your choice that brings about reconciliation, but you can choose to live in the reality of peace with God or you can live as if the war is still going on. That's what Paul means when he says that we are God's ambassadors. We are like the officials the Romans would send to a new territory after the war was over or a treaty had been signed. We are announcing peace. Yes, you could say that we are also announcing the victory of God, but here's the deal: the victory of God is good for everyone. The victory of God in the cross and resurrection brings peace between God and humanity and will ultimately bring peace among humans themselves.

So when we plead "Be reconciled to God!" it is not that we are saying "Change yourself so that God can accept you." It is not saying to do anything. Our message is "Live in the new creation. Live as part of the new humanity in Christ. Live as if your life is united with the resurrected Messiah, because it really is." A book came out last month with the title *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart*. Its argument is that we need to focus not on the individual's act of, as we say in modern lingo, "asking Jesus into your heart" or "accepting Christ as your personal Savior," but instead focusing on the gospel. The gospel is that good news that God has reconciled us to himself and salvation is a matter of living in that reality.

That is the primary meaning of "the ministry of reconciliation," but there is something else going on in Paul. If you read through the rest of this letter to the church in Corinth, you would see that Paul is also seeking to be reconciled to them. His former disciples seem to have turned against him because he seems weak to them, so he tells them that God has placed the treasure of this good news in jars of clay, in bodies that suffer as Jesus suffered to reveal the reality of Jesus' life and love. Paul lists all the hard times he has been through, then he says "There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours...Open your hearts wide also" (6:12-13). There is a kind of subtext in this letter that if reconciliation is what God is about in the world, don't you think we should be reconciled?

In the later letters of Colossians and Ephesians—which I think Paul wrote, but some do not—that human-to-human aspect of reconciliation becomes primary in what Paul says. In Colossians it comes at the end of the early creed which begins “He is the image of the invisible God”(1:15f). The climax of the creed is “For in him [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (1:19-20). It’s a cosmic conception of reconciliation, and it’s already accomplished. The peace is real. The universe is reunited. But then Paul adds his own comments: “And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds”—that is, us humans in our screwed-up condition, although it could also mean us Gentiles—“[Christ] has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death.” Then he says that the secret that has been hidden through all the ages and generations has now been revealed: that God’s glory is now available to Gentiles, available to the whole world. God has reconciled all people to himself, not just the Jews.

In Ephesians this is really the main theme of the letter—that Jews and Gentiles were once estranged, and outside of God’s revelation to Israel the non-Jews had no hope, but now through the cross Jews and Gentiles have been made one. Paul is making it explicit: the reconciliation of humans to God also brings about the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles, the reconciliation of racial groups that once distrusted and even hated each other. The letter says, “[Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and he has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (2:14). Christ’s purpose was “to create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and [to] reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross” (15-16). Look, through the cross of Jesus the alienation between us and God was taken away. That has made us one with Christ in his body, the church. And as we have become one with God through Christ, we have also become one with other people who were our enemies, because they too have been reconciled to God. Ephesians argues boldly that God’s purpose from the very beginning was to create one new multiracial humanity, and reconciliation of humans to God and to one another were two sides of the same project.

So God has given us that ministry of reconciliation as well. As we announce that we have been reconciled with God, the corollary is that if God has removed the barriers to a love relationship with himself, he has also made all humans at least potentially one as they reunite with God. There can be no question that in the book of Acts and in these letters the theme of racial reconciliation is one of the main themes. How in the world did the church lose sight of that when it came to white and Black or Native or Asian or Hispanic? As God has reconciled humanity to himself, he has reconciled us to one another in one body.

A few years ago, Jay Winik wrote a book called *April 1865: The Month that Saved America*. There is a scene in that book after the fall of Richmond that takes place in Saint Paul’s Episcopal Church in that city. It was a communion service in that fateful month. Normally the white worshipers would be served first, then the black worshipers would come from the side galleys. But on this Sunday a distinguished looking black man was the first to make his way to the altar, where he knelt to receive the tokens of Christ’s love. The white congregants froze. But one white man rose, one who had gone from wealth to poverty, from a mansion in Arlington to homelessness in Richmond. It was Robert E. Lee who rose from his pew and knelt next to the black man to receive signs of Jesus’ body and blood. He acknowledged the reconciliation that Jesus had already accomplished.

Last weekend there was a Civil Rights Pilgrimage in Alabama, which began at the University of Alabama, at the schoolhouse door where George Wallace declared “Segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” Wallace’s daughter and a sister of the first black graduate of Alabama, one of the two first students to enroll, stood together in that door and held hands. Wallace’s daughter issued a stirring call to unity. Later in Birmingham they gathered around a monument to the struggle

there, and the Republican House majority leader and the Democratic House minority whip joined hands with 28 other representatives and African American leaders.

When they got to Montgomery, the chief of police apologized to Congressman John Lewis on behalf of the Montgomery police force, the same police force that allowed Lewis to be beaten. The white police chief took off his badge and gave it to Lewis. He said, "This symbol of authority, which used to be a symbol of oppression, needs to be a symbol of reconciliation."

Friends, we must not let the gospel be tied to struggles over authority and become a symbol of oppression. The cross is a symbol of reconciliation, and the good news is that God has acted to reunite us to himself and to one another.