

**RECONCILIATION EXPERIENCED & EXTENDED****2 CORINTHIANS 5:16 – 6:2**

When he was Secretary of State during the Reagan administration, the late George Shultz kept a large globe in his office. When any newly appointed ambassador had an interview with him before leaving for their new assignment, Shultz would give them a little test. He would say, “You have to go over to the globe and prove to me that you can identify your country.” The ambassador would spin the globe and put their finger on the country to which they were being sent. This little test happened without fail. When Shultz’s old friend and former Senate majority leader, Mike Mansfield, was appointed ambassador to Japan, even he was asked to take Shultz’ test. This time, however, Ambassador Mansfield spun the globe and put his hand on the United States. He said, “That’s my country.” George Shultz was impressed. He said, “I’ve told that story, subsequently, to all the ambassadors going out. I say to them, ‘Never forget you’ve over there in that country, but your country is the United States. You’re there to represent us. Take care of our interests and never forget it. You’re representing the best country in the world.’ When you’re an ambassador, it’s vitally important to always remember what country you represent.

In our Scripture passage today, every follower of Jesus is called an ambassador. You represent the Kingdom of God among all the other nations and people groups in this world. You’re sent into this world as an ambassador of the Monarch of that unseen, spiritual - but very real - “country” called the Kingdom of God. I’m talking about King Jesus. You’re His ambassador. And as His ambassadors, you and I have a job, a task, a mission, a goal, and a purpose every day that we live. It’s all wrapped up in another word that shows up in our Scripture passage today. It’s the word “reconciliation.” Let’s read the passage now.

Being cruciform. Living out a cross-shaped life. That’s a mega theme of 2 Corinthians – this letter the great Christian leader, Paul, wrote to the very first group of Christians living in the city of Corinth. Even though they were followers of Jesus, they were new to the Christian life. One evidence of their spiritual immaturity was the fact they were a relational disaster zone. Dissension, strife, backbiting, gossip, slander, cliques, favoritism. And a big piece of that relational upset was with Paul – their spiritual father. If there was ever a group of people in need of conflict management and reconciliation in their relationships, it was the Christians at Corinth! So, in the passage we read, Paul told them – and he tells us, too – that as followers of Jesus – His ambassadors – we are called to something. Being cruciform, having a cross-shaped life, means...

**I’M CALLED TO A MESSAGE OF RECONCILIATION.**

Paul said here, “For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people’s sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation.” (2 Cor. 5:19 NLT) What does that mean? Well, first of all, what is reconciliation? Reconciliation is when a relationship defined by hostility is replaced by one marked by peace and goodwill. We have relationships with family, friends, co-workers, fellow students, neighbors – just to identify a few. I suspect every last one of

us here today has had at least one relationship with another person turn out sour, negative, and ugly. Many of us know only too well the deep pain associated with a persistently hateful, hostile relationship with another person. Every one of us here today has also experienced reconciliation. A sour, strained, or broken relationship somehow got fixed and became peaceful, productive, and positive again.

Why is there so much hostility and hatred out there today? No doubt most of you are aware of what's called cyberbullying – attacking and denigrating people through some kind of social media platform like Twitter, Facebook, or emails. Why do people say vile things about or to others? Why is there such division and polarization in our country? Why have we given ourselves permission to treat one another with hate, bitterness, and negativity? Why is divorce so commonplace? Why do parents and kids end up treating each other in ways they'd never treat a total stranger? Even members of the same church can dislike each other, avoid each other, and refuse to resolve their differences.

Why? Just one word sums up the answer: Sin. Sin is the cause of every unkind word, every selfish action, every prideful attitude, every thoughtless behavior, and every broken relationship. The root of all hostility between two people or between groups of people goes back to a much more fundamental and basic hostility – our dislike of God (sometimes unconscious, but still very real), His rules, and His authority over and in our lives. Unless and until you're reconciled to God, you can never be completely reconciled to anyone else in your life. I'm not saying you won't have some friends or some good relationships, but there will always be some big barriers. When you get reconciled to God, it's possible only then to be reconciled to everyone else in your life.

The Bible is the story of how you and I had a broken relationship with God and the steps God has taken to fix it. Our relationship with God was in desperate need of reconciliation. Despite the fact this is God's universe, we decided we didn't need Him telling us how to live our lives. But the Bible says that while we were content to maintain this hostile relationship with God – hurting God, hurting ourselves, and hurting others through our sinful attitudes and actions – God took the first and most important step toward making peace. It really wasn't God's responsibility to seek peace with us. After all, He was the One who'd been wronged by us. Nevertheless, God sent His Son to die in our place on the cross. That's very clear in the passage we read earlier, "For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ." (2 Cor 5:21 NLT)

On March 10, 1974, Lt. Hiroo Onada was the last World War II Japanese soldier to surrender. Onada had been left on the island Lubang in the Philippines on December 25, 1944, with the command to keep on fighting even if Japan surrendered. All efforts to convince him to surrender or to capture him failed. He ignored loudspeaker messages announcing Japan's surrender and that Japan was now an ally of the United States. Leaflets were dropped over the jungle begging him to surrender so he could return to Japan. He refused. Over the years he lived off the land and raided the fields and gardens of local citizens. He was responsible for killing at least 30 Filipinos during his 29 year personal war. Almost a half million dollars was spent trying to locate and

convince him to surrender. Finally, almost 30 years after World War II ended, Onada surrendered his now rusty sword after receiving a personal command from his former superior officer. Onada handed his sword to the president of the Philippines who pardoned him. The war was over. Onada was 22-years-old when he was left on the island, 52 years old when he finally surrendered. Like Hiroo Onada, many people are still fighting a lonely battle against God. News flash, people! God has already won the war and He's offering all of us reconciliation and peace with Him.

The first and most important relationship that needs to be changed is the one you have with God Himself. That begins when you put your trust in Jesus as your Savior and Lord. On the basis of what He did for you on the cross, you ask Him to forgive you of your sins and rebellion against God. Now that the Holy Spirit lives within you, you begin to live out a life that pleases God. Oh, it's a very gradual process, to be sure, but if you're truly a disciple of Jesus, you will make progress. Why? Well, because you're actually a new person now. Did you hear that in what we read earlier? "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Cor. 5:17 NLT). Everything about your relationship with God changes. Once you had no relationship with God to speak of; now you call Him Father and He calls you son or daughter. Once you were hostile toward Him; now you love Him. Once you dreaded God and didn't want to be near Him; now you treasure His presence and want to be close to Him. Once even the idea of God made you feel anxious; now it's God alone that gives you peace and joy.

Is this new relationship with God supposed to be kept a big secret? Absolutely not! Every follower of Jesus is called to share this message of reconciliation with God with those who have a broken relationship with Him. There's a story of a young man who applied for a job as an usher at a theater. The manager asked him, "What would you do in case a fire breaks out?" The young man answered, "Oh, don't worry about me. I'd get out OK." That wasn't the answer the manager wanted to hear. Sadly, that can resemble the attitude of some followers of Jesus. "What would you do if Jesus came back tomorrow and eternity began?" "Oh, don't worry about me! I'll be OK!" But you're called to be a spiritual usher. You're a doorkeeper into the house of God. It isn't enough just to get yourself out. God is calling and expecting you to help others get out.

This is why we encourage you to pray for specific spiritually lost people in your circles of influence. This is why you look for opportunities to get into spiritual conversations with them. This is why – if God gives you the opportunity - you actually share with a lost person a verbal explanation of what Jesus did and invite him or her to put his or her trust in Jesus. Every follower of Jesus is called to share the message of reconciliation. Not just pastors, not just missionaries, not just church staff members or church leaders – anyone and everyone who has been reconciled to God is now called to share the message or reconciliation with others. You're Jesus' ambassador!

That message of reconciliation is all wrapped up in being Jesus' ambassador. "So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, 'Come back to God!'" (2 Cor 5:20 NLT) What does an American

ambassador do? Their job is to represent and advance the interests of the United States in a foreign country. While he or she lives in that other country, he or she is still a citizen of the United States. As Jesus' ambassador your ultimate loyalty in this life is to Jesus because you're ultimately a citizen of His Kingdom. In fact, being a citizen of God's Kingdom is even more important to you than being a citizen of the United States. Most of the time there's no conflict between being an American and being a follower of Jesus. We can be both at the same time. But if there ever comes a time when we have to choose between one or the other, the follower of Jesus always chooses the Kingdom of God and King Jesus first and foremost. Often an ambassador learns the language, customs, and culture of the county to which he or she is sent without becoming a citizen of that country. Followers of Jesus are like that. We're called to be fully in the world but not of the world. We're called to take part fully in all the different aspects of this earthly life while remembering, above all and in all, we belong to Jesus first and foremost.

One of the primary responsibilities of an American ambassador is to speak out on behalf of the United States in that foreign country. Likewise, as followers of Jesus we represent Jesus in our homes, our schools, our neighborhoods, at our jobs, in the voting booth, on social media, and in society itself. An American ambassador understands the United States is often judged by his or her words, actions, behavior, and attitudes. The honor and reputation of our country is often in the hands of that American ambassador. Likewise, we realize the incredible privilege and responsibility to represent none other than the King of kings and the Lord of lords in every context of our lives. And because you represent Jesus in all those places, His honor and His reputation will often depend on your words, actions, behavior, and attitudes. Lost people will either be attracted to Jesus or turned off to Jesus by what they observe in your life and mine. Like it or not, fair or not, right or not, that's just the way it is. If you're a follower of Jesus today, you're called to share the message of reconciliation. As Jesus' ambassadors, we're called to something. Being cruciform, having a cross-shaped life, also means...

### **I'M CALLED TO A MINISTRY OR RECONCILIATION.**

In other words, you are now a reconciler. Because you have a new, healthy, vertical relationship with God through His Son, Jesus, the potential exists for new, healthy, horizontal relationships both with yourself and with others. Perhaps that's sounds a little "out there" – having a relationship with yourself. What's that about? I've met so many people over the years – many of them in churches, sad to say - who essentially have a very broken or negative view of themselves. They think of themselves as worthless, or lacking value, or being of little importance to God or anyone else. The world without God tries to fill the void by telling us to think positively or to keep our chin up. I'm convinced only God can give you, me, or anyone else the real basis for our worth or value. The Bible says you were made in God's image; therefore, you are worthwhile. It also says that you're a person for whom Jesus gave up His life on the cross; therefore, you have infinite value. The cross symbolizes many things. Among other great truths, it's the greatest monument to your essential value and worth as God's creature. You don't have to earn, deserve, or prove your value to God. It's a given. It just is.

Being reconciled to yourself can also mean being true to your true self and false to your false self. Let me explain. Your true self is the good stuff that's in you today – whatever God put into you at your conception. It's everything in you for which Jesus died to save or redeem. Like what? Like your own unique personality, your gifts and abilities, your desire to know and worship God, your love for family and friends, your love of beauty however it's expressed, and how you like to serve others or meet their needs. Your false self is the bad stuff that's in you today. It's all the broken, dark, messy stuff inside each of us. Frankly, it's the stuff Jesus died on the cross to get rid of in your life. It's found in our pride and in the unique ways we still resist and refuse God's authority over our lives. The cross tells you and me we're of infinite worth to God and that there's so much in us that's worthy of being saved and redeemed. But the cross also tells you and me that there's stuff inside of us that also needs to die out, to be utterly destroyed, and to be sent to Hell where it belongs. Being cruciform speaks to both realities. When you can discern between your true self and your false self – nurturing the true self and putting to death the false one – one kind of reconciliation is happening.

Being a reconciler also means our relationships with others can be transformed in healthy, positive ways. Why is that? One reason is because the cross of Jesus has the power to change how you evaluate people. Paul mentioned that in our Bible passage, "So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now!" (2 Cor 5:16 NLT) There was a time before his conversion when Paul evaluated Jesus from a human perspective. Jesus appeared to be a heretic, a failure, a blasphemer, and a scoundrel. But then Paul met Jesus through a vision on the road to Damascus. He saw Jesus from God's perspective and the verdict was very different indeed!

How does the world without God evaluate your worth, my worth, your value, and my value? It looks at the color of our skin. It looks to see if we're male or female. It considers how physically attractive we might or might not be. It takes in our level of education. It ranks us in terms of income, what kind of house you live in, and what kind of job or career we go to on Monday. It might even judge you by your social or political views. All of those criteria mean a great deal to the world without God, but they mean nothing to God. When you become a follower of Jesus, the criteria you use to evaluate other human beings and the value of relationships with them changes.

Leonard Sweet, a Christian author, tells a great story about a Christian friend, Tom Wiles. A few years ago, Tom picked Leonard up at the airport in his brand, new Ford pickup. Leonard was scheduled to speak at a leadership conference at the university where Tom worked. When he was about to get back in the truck for his ride back to the airport the next day, Leonard noticed two very big, very new scrapes by the passenger door. "What happened here?" "My neighbor's basketball post fell and left those dents and scars," Tom replied sounding down. "You're kidding! How awful," Leonard said. "This truck is so new I can smell it." Tom answered, "Yeah, what's even worse is my neighbor doesn't feel responsible for the damage." Leonard was outraged for his new friend. "Did you contact your insurance company? How are you going to get him to pay for it?" "This has been a real spiritual journey for me," Tom replied. "After a lot of soul-

searching and discussions with my wife about hiring an attorney, it came down to this: I can either be in the right, or I can be in a relationship with my neighbor. Since my neighbor will probably be with me longer than this truck, I decided that I'd rather be in a relationship than be right. Besides, trucks are meant to be banged up, so I got mine initiated into the real world a bit earlier than I expected!"

When you begin to see people from the perspective of the cross – through the eyes of Jesus - you become a reconciler. Think about marriage as one example. No human relationship has more potential for joy and blessing or for pain and heartache. When you begin to see your spouse not as your “cross to bear” but someone for whom Jesus gave His life on the cross, it can change everything. How can you ignore, snub, or disrespect such a creature? Think about the role of a parent as an example. Children aren't an inconvenience or a drain on your wallet. They're precious beings entrusted to you, Mom and Dad, to mold and shape to the best of your ability. Think about your brothers and sisters in this church as an example. Followers of Jesus in Corinth were writing each other off and treating one another harshly. That still happens today. If we could just see our brothers and sisters through the eyes of Jesus, it would be so much easier to say, “I'm sorry. I treated you badly. Please forgive me.” Think about needy people right here in Northland and beyond – the homeless, the poor, the refugees, the immigrants, the ones who struggle to learn or just to get ahead in life. There are no ordinary people. Not if you look at them through the eyes of Jesus. Each one a creation of God. Each one a person for whom Jesus died. Each one an eternal being.

June 11, 1963: Tuscaloosa, Alabama, The University of Alabama campus. Vivian Malone, a young black woman, enrolled as a student at the university, but not without opposition. Federal troops were there to ensure her entrance into the school, but her way was blocked by then Governor George Wallace. Holding out for racism and segregation, the governor failed in his attempt. Vivian became the first African-American student ever to graduate from the University of Alabama. George Wallace came to regret his actions. Many years later, he was taken in his wheelchair into the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. There he asked the African-American people in attendance to forgive him for his racism. The former governor also regretted how he treated Vivian that day and sought out her forgiveness. He wanted to make amends before he died, and he wanted to meet her. Vivian did meet him and told him that she had, in fact, already forgiven him years earlier. She was asked about this: "You said you'd forgiven him many years earlier?" "Oh yes." "And why did you do that?" This was Vivian Malone's reply: "This may sound weird. I'm a Christian, and I grew up in the church. I was taught that no other person was better than me. I was taught that we were all equal in the eyes of God. And I was also taught that you forgive people, no matter what. That was why I had to do it. I didn't feel as if I had a choice."

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? Vivian Malone's a pretty good example of what that means. It means you take your appointment as an ambassador for King Jesus seriously. You've been given a message of reconciliation. You've been given a ministry of reconciliation.