

Sunday, 25-Oct-2015
Bethel Christian Church, Fair Lawn, NJ
The Great Exchange
2 Corinthians 5:18-21 [read 2 Cor. 5:14-6:2.]
Peter Flowers

Reformation Sunday

It is wonderful to be with you again. I particularly appreciate Pastor Ron inviting me to preach on this Sunday, the Sunday closest to Reformation Day itself, which is October 31st. Each year at this time we remember how much we owe to that movement and everyone involved in it.

We should think not only about the great, like Luther and Calvin and Bullinger and Bucer and Beza, but also the small, men and women whose names history has not recorded but who came to a new understanding of their renewed relationship with God in and through Jesus Christ.

And that is my theme today -- the renewed standing we have with God, thanks to the work of Jesus Christ, both his entire life of faithful obedience to the Father, and the sacrifice he made for you on me on the cross, a sacrifice which God vindicated by the Resurrection.

There are many places in the New Testament where we could go to find this theme, but I want to look today at one of the most important, 2 Corinthians 5:18-21.

Before we get started, I would like to refresh your memory about 2 Corinthians. Paul had come to Corinth and had spent quite a while, perhaps 18 months, and had founded the church there. Then he went on to other work.

Some time later he received word that a variety of things had gone pretty seriously astray in the Corinthian church. The letter we know as 1 Corinthians gives his response, a vigorous rebuke and command to them to mend their ways.

From what Paul says in 2 Corinthians it appears that many of those in Corinth were responsive to his rebuke -- and let me digress for a second to ask -- are you responsive to rebuke? Do you listen to it? Have you ever said, "oh my, I deserved that rebuke! I will mend my ways?" Do I ever say that? Should I say that?

Well, in Corinth they did respond positively to Paul's rebuke. Nevertheless, things were still not perfect in Corinth, and Paul wrote to them once again in the letter we know as 2 Corinthians. One of the topics he deals with in 2 Corinthians is criticism of his ministry. It seems that certain "super-apostles" had come from Jerusalem and had said, oh, you know, you really don't need to listen to Paul's message. After all, Paul is weak and he isn't very good looking and he is sick and he isn't a brilliant preacher and anyway he doesn't have a fancy big screen in his mega-church like we do.

So when we get to our text today, we find Paul in the midst of discussing his own ministry -- what he does, and even more important, why he does it.

So with that background, let's turn to today's passage in 2 Corinthians, chapter 5. I will primarily be dwelling on verses 18-21, but we will need some context, so let's read from verse 14 all the way through chapter 6, verse 2. [READ 2 Cor. 5:14-6:2.]

In verse 18, which begins my main focus today, Paul says: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."

What does he mean by "All this is from God"? What is the "all this" which God has given?

Well, in verse 14 Paul had said that Christ's love compels us. When he says "us," he is referring to himself. He is saying that there is something about Christ's love that constrains him, compels him, herds him, so to speak, into his service.

Now why does Christ's love compel Paul? Because Paul has come to recognize that one died for all. By "one" Paul of course means Christ. Christ died, and he died for us. As Paul had proclaimed in his first letter to the Corinthians, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3).

That is the love of Christ which is driving Paul in his ministry -- Christ's death, in which he paid the penalty for our sin -- let me be specific here -- he paid for each and every one of *my* sins! Each one. Every one. And yours. It still is beyond my comprehension that he loved *me* enough, sinner that I was, to die for me.

At the end of verse 14 Paul says that the result of Christ's payment for sin is that "all have died." Paul doesn't mean that somehow Christ's death caused every human being

to die. Rather, he is harking back to what happened in The Fall, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the apple. The result of that disobedience was that all humans are born dead spiritually, and are sold into slavery to sin. We were dead in and through Adam.

But Christ died, and paid the penalty for us. And the result is that, instead of you and me dying in alienation from God because of our sin, *he* picked up that penalty. The death we should have died has happened -- that death has been suffered -- but Jesus is the one who suffered it. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me." That is what he suffered, and he suffered that instead of you and me. In short, we died to our sin and death when we came to faith in Christ! That is what Paul is saying.

So, Paul tells the Corinthian church in verse 17, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation"! Those who are Christians, who believe in him and are united to him, are created anew! Paul is referring here to the new birth. To be "born again" is to be recreated by God, totally changed from what we used to be. This is what Nicodemus had so much trouble understanding, when he had that night-time meeting with Jesus in the gospel of John, chapter 5.

In verse 18, to return to where we began, Paul says: all this is from God. In other words, everything Paul has been talking about is God's work through Christ. It is Christ who went to the cross, not me. It is Christ who has died my death, not me. It is Christ's Spirit who gives me the new birth -- not me, for I was dead in trespasses and sins, dead, dead, dead. I couldn't give myself life! Yet I am a new creation!

Now, Paul says, it is God who *reconciled* us to himself through Christ, that is, through Christ's obedient life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection.

Let's spend a minute on this word "reconciliation." To reconcile is to bring a person again into friendly relations with another after an estrangement.

The key point here is that to be reconciled only makes sense if two parties have been estranged, have been alienated, have been at bitter odds with each other.

Sadly, we probably all have at some point either been estranged from someone, or at least have seen it happen to people close to us. For we human beings, sometimes it isn't quite clear what went wrong, but something has gone terribly wrong, and now we aren't speaking to that person, we aren't seeing them, we are saying bad things about them

behind their backs. We cannot get along with them; we don't WANT to get along with them.

You know, the Bible is a very realistic book. People who never have read the Bible think that it is full of all nice soft gooey feelings. You know, pink fuzzy lovey dovey.

But when you read it you find it shows without flinching the hard, nasty side of human behavior.

Do you recall Euodia and Syntyche? You don't? They show up in two verses in Philippians 4.

2 I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. **3** Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel,

That is it. That is all that history records about Euodia and Syntyche. All we know about them is that, though they used to work closely with Paul for the gospel, now Paul has to stop in the middle of a letter to the Philippian church and plead with them to stop fighting with each other. They are *estranged*, and it isn't pretty.

Or what about that familiar story in Luke chapter 15, the parable of the prodigal son? You remember it, so I won't go into detail, but I will just remind you that the younger son must have hated his father. He wanted nothing to do with his father (or with his older brother, for that matter). So he demanded his inheritance before his father had died. In effect, he said, hey Dad, since I want you dead, how about you just give me my share of the booty? Did I mention that I wish you were dead?

Dad doesn't have to give it to him, but does, and the son goes far, far away so he won't have to have anything to do with Dad.

That is about as vivid a picture of estrangement as you can imagine.

So when we return to today's text, the first thing we notice is that reconciliation is necessary between God and the world. By "the world" here, Paul means you and me: we humans are estranged from God, but, worse yet, God is estranged from us.

What? God is estranged from us? Yes, he is! And Paul tells us *why* God is estranged from you and me in the next verse, verse 19. "God was reconciling the world to himself

in Christ, not counting people's sins against them." What is the problem from God's point of view?

One word. Sin.

Oh, you don't mean God takes my little peccadillos seriously, do you? Surely he doesn't care if I "borrow" a this nice green roller ball pen from the supply room at the office?

Um. Well, yes.

Sin is sin. God is holy. That he is holy implies (among other things) that he stands completely opposed to all that is sin -- he himself is Goodness, whereas sin is ... evil. Sin is evil. God cannot bear what is evil. As long as we are steeped in sin, he is estranged from us

Now the problem with God being estranged from us is that we can't fix it. Can you reach up to heaven to make God change his attitude? Let me know how that works for you.

No, if this estrangement is to be overcome, if we are to be reconciled to him and he to us, only he can do it. It must be something he plans and something he accomplishes.

How can a holy God do this? How can God, who is completely just and good, find a way to be at peace with people -- you and me -- who are just exactly the opposite -- disposed always to do evil, always shaking our fist at God?

The answer to that question is the heart of the gospel, the Good News, the GREAT News! And it is found in verse 21: "God made him who had no sin to be sin [or, a sin offering] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Christ had no sin. We know this. It is stated everywhere in the New Testament. He is the only sinless person who has ever lived. But he became sin -- that is, he became a sin offering -- for us. He bore our sins on the cross.

And God gives Christ's own obedient righteousness to us. When God looks at us, what he sees is not the fact that I still have this pen which I "borrowed" from my former employer. Instead, what he sees is Christ's perfect obedience to the law. This also is good news. If God only took away my sins up until the time I came to believe in Christ -- well, I still am a sinner, and I would just start piling up sins once again. But God gives

us Christ's righteousness, so now he sees in us the righteousness of God, not the sins we still commit.

You could say that God sees there being a swap between you and me on the one hand and Christ on the other. God swaps our sin over to Christ. Christ dies on the cross, but we live!

And God swaps Christ's own perfect righteousness to us, so that even though we are sinners, he sees us as righteous. We are regarded by God as righteous and obedient, because God himself imputes to us Christ's righteousness and obedience.

Martin Luther is said to have called this swap "the great exchange." I looked on the internet for the exact way he phrased this, and came across a quotation which referred to it, not as "the great exchange," but as "a wonderful exchange." Perhaps this is just a difference in the way Luther's German was translated.

Here is the quotation from Luther:

"That is the mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners: wherein by a *wonderful exchange* our sins are no longer ours but Christ's and the righteousness of Christ not Christ's but ours. He has emptied Himself of His righteousness that He might clothe us with it, and fill us with it.

And He has taken our evils upon Himself that He might deliver us from them... in the same manner as He grieved and suffered in our sins, and was confounded, in the same manner we rejoice and glory in His righteousness."

—Martin Luther, *Werke* (Weimar, 1883), 5: 608.

cited from

<https://tollelege.wordpress.com/2009/11/19/a-wonderful-exchange-by-martin-luther/>
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Luther is just following Paul: Paul rejoices and glories in the fact that God has broken through the barrier of sin and set the prisoner free -- that is you and me, we are the prisoners of sin -- but God through Christ has set us free.

And this, then, becomes Paul's "message of reconciliation," the core of the "ministry of reconciliation" in which he is engaged.

Paul comes to sinners, and he says: Look at what God has done! See, God has initiated reconciliation! Now the enmity, the estrangement, between you and God has been overcome!

So, as an ambassador for Christ, an authoritative messenger to you and to me from Christ, he says: “We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God” (v. 20).

But wait a minute. If it is God who has been doing the reconciling, why is Paul imploring us to “be reconciled to God”? Does this mean we have to do something as well?

And the answer of course is, yes, you do. Each one of us must commit ourselves in trust to this great action of Christ. We look to HIM for reconciliation with God. This is what we mean by “faith in Christ.”

But notice that we can’t force God to be reconciled to us through something WE have done. Did you notice that the English translations -- following the Greek text, I should add -- are in the passive voice? “*Be reconciled to God.*” That is, the work of reconciliation isn’t our work. It is something which God has done, and offers to us.

But still we must accept, we must embrace, God’s offer. “All we have to do is not to refuse the offered love of God.” [Charles Hodge, 1 & 2 Corinthians, p. 523.]

A New Testament scholar of a previous generation, the great James Denney of the Free Church College in Glasgow, put it this way:

“Men are saved freely, and it is all God’s work, not in the very least their own; yet that work does not avail for any one who does not by faith accept it.” -- James Denney, “Romans,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* [ed. W. Robertson Nicoll], vol. 2 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1897), p. 611, column b, commenting on Romans 3:25.

So this is Paul’s urgent appeal to his readers -- both those in Corinth, back in the first century, around 55 AD, and those today, hearing this message: You, you sitting there right now, you hearing this: Be reconciled to God! Instead of living under God’s wrath, accept the peace and love of God as his gift!

And I think there is still more here, for those of us who do put our trust in Christ, the one who died for us and rose for us. What more is there?

I think we too must bear the message of reconciliation to a lost and sinful world.

In chapter 6, verse 1, Paul says to the Corinthians -- remember, he is addressing them as people who *do* believe in Christ -- "As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain."

He doesn't mean that they could lose their salvation. What he means is, don't fritter away this good news, now that you have understood it. God made his appeal from Christ through Paul to the Corinthians. Now, you Corinthians listened to this appeal, and accepted Christ. Be constrained by Christ's love, just as I am. As I spread this message to you, so you spread the gospel to others.

When? Now!

"I tell you, *now* is the time of God's favor, *now* is the day of salvation!"

If the time is *now*, and the message is Christ, what are we doing? Are we joyful? Are we compelled by Christ's love to tell our neighbor or fellow worker? I say this to my own shame. Yet if we have heard this message, then we also must spread this message.

The Great Exchange. This is the greatest news in the world, and always will be, until Christ comes again. Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus!

Amen.