

“Coming Together”

Lent 2019 - “With All Your Heart” – part #4

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Have you ever had a falling out with a friend? My friend Mike and I went through a time early in our relationship when a misunderstanding and poorly chosen words caused a rift between us. It was particularly hard because we both followed Jesus and even served together in the same youth ministry. Uneasiness nagged at my conscience in our interactions for several weeks.

However, there came a moment of reconciliation that I will never forget. One of our students was asking about forgiveness. In particular, how could God forgive all of our sins? I answered that God chooses to forgive us, every time we ask, because of the cross. We simply have to say, honestly, “I’m sorry that I hurt you.” At that point, I turned to Mike and demonstrated that confession. But it wasn’t just an example for a curious student. It was a real moment of forgiveness and humility for me. Mike offered the same word of reconciliation in return, and our relationship grew much deeper as a result.

The truth is, we all have fights and arguments, some more than others. It is part of life. If you and I agree, one of us is not necessary! So to live is to disagree, however we should not live to disagree. We should live to reconcile. Rather than hold on to grudges, anger, and discontent, we should strive to be at peace with others. (See **Romans 12:18**.) Yet, we see a world where people do not choose to reconcile; instead they engage in lengthy, time-consuming and life-draining wars. We seem to lack the motivation to reconcile. Where can we find it?

Hopefully, your first thought is to turn to God’s Word. We are, after all, in the church right now. One of the scriptures we can read is 2nd Corinthians, which

is basically a letter written because of several arguments between the apostle Paul and the church in Corinth. As we discussed last week, Corinth was a hotbed of trouble, including idolatry, greed, and immorality. Although Paul had helped plant the church, it seemed that many in this congregation did not accept his authority. So Paul painstakingly wrote to them, explaining why he had authority as an apostle of Christ. Understand, Paul's desire was not to shame or bully the church into agreement. No, his greatest desire was to persuade them in love so that the church would excel. Paul even pointed out that he was not bragging for himself; rather, he wanted the Corinthians to claim Paul and others like him as their examples. Paul knew he was a passionate speaker. Look at **verse 13**. Paul writes, "If we are 'out of our mind,' as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you." Paul admitted he was "out of his mind" ...for Christ.

Do you know someone who is crazy for Jesus? Let me tell you, my buddy Mike is. My relationship with Mike motivates me to be crazy for Jesus as well. And we know that we are in good company. Listen to what they said about Jesus in **Mark 3:21**:

"When His family heard about this, they went out to take custody of Him, saying, 'He is out of His mind.'"

We follow a Savior who was mocked openly for the things he did and said. He ate with sinners. He told people that whoever ate his flesh and drank his blood would have eternal life; if they did not, they were dead. (**John 6:53-54**) That's crazy! Jesus used hyperbole to get their attention. Why? Jesus was driven by his love of God to bring people back to a right relationship. Yes, Jesus ate with sinners, taught a bunch of smelly fishermen, went toe-to-toe with the self-righteous religious leaders, and healed the untouchables with his own hands.

Jesus was crazy – with love and compassion. There is no other way to explain how he died on the cross to save the world.

This love, Paul says, compels him to preach. **2 Corinthians 5:14-15** says, “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.”

If I were to ask you right now, “Have you died?” you would likely say, “No! At least, I hope not.” So what is Paul talking about? He is talking about sin. Ego. Self. Pride. Every Christian should know that our old way of life died with Christ on the cross. True disciples no longer live for themselves; they live for Jesus.

That sounds like a good idea to me. Hopefully it does to you, too. So the question remains, how do we stop living for ourselves and start living for Christ?

Paul says the answer is through our relationships. When we are in Christ, everything is made new. (**2 Cor 5:17**) We have a new relationship with God through Christ, and we have a new way to relate to others. All of our relationships are now marked by reconciliation. In Jesus we are justified, which means God no longer counts our sins against us. We have forgiveness. A clean slate. A “do over.” Paul argues that we truly do not know just how good it is.

2 Corinthians 5:21 says this: Christ, who had no sin, was made to be sin, so that in him, we would become the righteousness of God. Wow. Just sit with that thought for a moment. Christ, the holy, perfect Lamb of God, took on all of our ugliness: our hatred, our cursing, our greed, our indifference, our apathy, our hard hearts, our nasty words, our cruel actions, the darkest secrets of our souls, our rebellion against the Almighty God himself. And in return for all the scum Jesus took from our lives, we get his perfect, sinless, whole and healthy life.

Aren't you glad Christ rose from the grave? I am. I don't want to wear those old grave clothes anymore.

Look again at **2 Corinthians 5:17**: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." Anyone. You and I, whoever says "Yes!" to Jesus is made new.

So what are we to do with this newness? In a word, share it. Be reconciled with God, and tell others to be reconciled with God. It is our duty, our ministry, our charge, our calling. Paul says we are Christ's ambassadors. (**2 Cor 5:20**)

Ambassadors have a lot of power. In Washington DC, they can leave their cars anywhere and not get tickets. Someone told me how the police called an embassy once and begged them to move their ambassador's car. Apparently, it broke down, so the man just left it, and the police couldn't tow it away. It had sat on the streets for months! Why? The power behind the ambassador's position rested with the country who sent him.

Paul says we are ambassadors for Christ. You know the phrase from Spiderman: "With great power comes great responsibility." Spidey has nothing on us! We bear the greatest message from the greatest person in the history of the world!

And yet, so many of us think we are no better than common citizens, or even criminals. We keep the good news a secret. We don't tell anyone that we are Christians. We don't share our faith.

Just dwell on these two statistics I read this week. **"70% of those attending church one or more times a month never share their faith with a stranger."**¹

¹ Baylor Religion Surveys, Baylor University, 2007; State of American Theology, Lifeway Research, 2014

"70% unchurched people have never been invited to church in their whole lives."²

It only takes one person to be an ambassador. And yet, how much stronger could we be as a team?

Ambassadors are critical for good relationships. By their words, they can foster peace or start a war. Look around you. The world is broken. The church is broken. Do we act like Christ's ambassadors? Or do we simply believe what we have now is good enough? If you are OK with brokenness, you will do nothing. You won't reach out to others, not even those in your own congregation, let alone strangers who have never known Christ. You won't give sacrificially to the church and its ministries. You won't worry about how often you attend worship. None of that matters if you are content with brokenness.

But if you follow Paul's example, you will write to your friends and neighbors. You will call them, speak to them, text and message them. You will invite them to coffee, to Easter breakfast, to church and conversation. You will call someone who hasn't spoken to you in weeks, months, maybe years. You will offer to pray for them.

Apathy or empathy? The choice is yours. No one, not even God, can force you to do this.

There is a saying, "People don't give to need; they give to vision." As your pastor, I will be honest to you about our need. Giving and attendance have declined in this congregation – by about 10-15% percent over that past year. But that is not what I am anxious about. I am anxious about the vitality of our ministry. Our witness in the community. Our ability to host VBS, teach Sunday

² The Unchurched Next Door, Thom Ranier

School, offer a place for funerals, weddings, bible studies, AA, Al-Anon, Scouts, and small groups. These things cannot be taken for granted. They only happen when we, together, as a congregation, a family, one body, commit to the ministry of reconciliation. No one wants to attend a dying church, one filled with disdain and bitterness towards others and the world.

So how does a church change its direction? With a commitment to reconciliation. As ambassadors, we commit to do the job Christ has asked us to do. It's as simple as picking up a directory and making one phone call. It is responding to a need – like sitting next to a man who had a stroke so his wife can run errands. Or offering to organize church potlucks and events for the community. Or serving on a leadership team. Or just walking to your neighbor's door and inviting them to worship with you.

As ambassadors, we are still broken. We need Jesus. To be reconciled to God, we must first admit that the relationship is broken. Who broke up with God? We did.

But remember that we are always a people of hope. Paul said not to give up. In **2 Corinthians 4:16**, he says, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” Christ never gave up. He never quit. Christ did not have just a finger crucified. Or a toe. He gave his whole body, his whole life. Jesus didn't hang on the cross for a little while and then quit when he got tired. He refused to call down angels to rescue him. Jesus went the full length to save us, willingly. No short cuts.

With Christ as our leader, there is nothing that we cannot do, if we are willing. May you be willing to give your all as an ambassador for the one who gave his all for you.