

Gospel of Peace

Series: Seek Peace and Pursue It

2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Ephesians 2:12-18, Colossians 1:19-20

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2 Corinthians 5:16-21

16From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. 17So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Ephesians 2:12-18

12remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. 15He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

Colossians 1:19-20

19For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20and 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.

We are willful human beings. Our wills bump up against each other. This can lead to conflict, alienation, enmity. Sometimes our offences against each other are small and we can just move on. Other times they are large and need to be attended to. Otherwise, relationships can break down—there is no longer a sense of kinship with each other. What is needed is reconciliation.

Reconciliation literally means to re-council each other. People who have been torn apart for some reason need to be brought into council again, they need to be reunited with each other. They need reconciliation.

I called my sermon this morning the Gospel of Peace. I might just as well called it the Gospel of Reconciliation or the Reconciling Gospel. I want to lay out for you this morning Paul's threefold understanding of the gospel of reconciliation: one, reconciliation between God and ourselves, two, reconciliation between groups of people, and three, reconciliation between Jesus and the whole creation.

2 Cor 5:16-21: This first verse is curious: we no longer regard anyone from a human point of view. In fact, Paul says he no longer regards Christ from a human point of view. What's that about?

Recall that Paul, before his encounter with Christ—when he was called Saul—was deeply offended at the idea that Christ was the Messiah who died on the cross to save people from their sins. The Old Testament said that anyone was cursed who died on a (Deut 21:23). How can salvation come out of such an ignominious event?

After his conversation on the road to Tarsus, Paul had a new way of seeing, insight, perception: the very thing that offended him, Christ's death on the cross, he came to realize was for the salvation of the world. The cross became the center of his theology. Hence, he could no longer go on looking at Christ from his former, human point of view.

But Jesus' death and resurrection should change the way we look at others as well—not from our own self-interest or our own prejudices. We must look at others as people, just like us, for whom Christ died. We are sinners; they are sinners. Christ died for us; Christ died for them. This reality gives us a whole new perspective on others: don't look at them in a human way; we look at them the way Christ would.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (v. 17). Some translations say, *If anyone is in Christ, **he** is a new creation.* But that's not what the text says. That is reductionistic. No, Paul said that if anyone is in Christ there is a whole new reality. One sees life through the perspective of Christ's cross and resurrection. There are consequences from seeing reality in this new way: we engage ourselves in ministries of reconciliation; and we become ambassadors of Christ's reconciliation, letting people know that their reconciliation has already been accomplished by Christ's death on the cross. We announce to people that God has taken action on their behalf to bring about reconciliation between them and God.

We just celebrated Juneteenth. The Civil War had ended, but some slaves and their owners in Texas hadn't gotten the word that they were emancipated. Some ambassadors of goodwill needed to let the slaves know they're free. Even then some didn't believe it and some of their owners didn't want to free them. Similarly, some people go on living as though their liberation in Christ hasn't happened. But we need to let them know that their liberation has already been accomplished in Christ.

Eph. 2:12-18: Some years ago I read a book titled *Is There Life After High School?* If you're still in high school, let me assure you that there is life after high school. (By the way, was it Frank Zappa who said that high school isn't a place, it's a state of mind? Go to a high school reunion if you want to figure out what that means.)

Anyway, this book by Ralph Keyes divided high schoolers into the "innies" and the "outies." The innies were the popular kids, the outies were not. He also talked about a third group between those two, not quite one or the other. Some of them were intent on looking into the innie group, wishing they could be part of them. This group tended to become journalists, or so he said.

In this passage from Paul the Jews are definitely the innies. The Jews had the law; they were God's chosen people. They were on the inside. Gentiles were on the outside looking in; literally, the temple had a wall which kept the Gentiles—us, in other words—in the outer court, kept them from the inner court.

Paul says that in his death Christ broke down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles and made us one. Jesus' death in the New Testament is sometimes portrayed as a sacrifice for our sins; at other times as a ransom to spring us free from the reign of evil in our lives. Here Paul says the cross had the effect of breaking down a human wall between two groups at odds with each other.

Does this mean that Christ only breaks down the wall between Jews and Gentiles? I think not. I think Christ is about the work of breaking down walls between people groups, whether by nationality, ethnicity, race, or economic status.

Alienation and conflict between people groups are among some of the most persistent in human conflict. Grudges and grievances are often passed on from generation to generation until the original cause is forgotten, but not the feelings of negativity toward the other group.

We get our identity from the groups to which we belong. Being in our groups makes us feel safe and secure. But our own group identities can blind us to the humanity of other groups and we see them through our own group's biases and prejudices.

Christ's work of breaking down walls of hostilities between people groups is probably one of the most needed ministries in our world today.

Col 1:19-20: Paul was most likely quoting from an early Christian hymn that the church at Colossae already knew. It would have sounded familiar to them when this letter of Paul's was read.

Paul used the hymn to make two points: Christ, God's agent of creation, created all things and all things are united in him. Yet, here too there is separation and enmity and lack of harmony and peace. Christ's death was to reunite all things together in him.

Maybe it's hard to understand this, even though we know Paul said in Romans that all creation groans with eager expectation for his redemption (Rom 8). With the effects of global warming on creation, we should not have to wonder anymore about how creation itself is out of sync with Christ, its Creator. Something is awry. The world and its elements are not at peace. They too need to be reunited with Christ, their Creator.

Of course we have a role in working at the healing of creation: reducing our own carbon foot print, for example; doing positive things to enhance and heal creation such as planting 700 trees out back. Sometimes our actions seem only symbolic. That doesn't mean our actions are insignificant. They are important symbolism, action taken in anticipation of when all things will be reunited again with Christ.

To wrap up, I'd like to underscore several points. It is God who initiates reconciliation. The cross and resurrection are at the heart of it. Sometimes we Mennonites tend to focus on our part in reconciliation, and we're in danger of losing touch with God's part.

Second, reconciliation is more a matter of spiritual formation than a program or strategy, it's a transformation that should make a real difference in our lives—for the reconciliation of people to God and each other, people groups to other people groups, and indeed all of creation.

Third, there is an eschatological dimension to God's reconciling work. We're not going to see it in all its fruition in this life. That awaits us in the world to come, when God's kingdom comes in all its fullness and the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God and his Christ.

Meanwhile, the church is to be the harbinger of God's coming kingdom of peace, love, justice. Sadly, the church itself is divided and broken. We are part of the problem.

This past week Jenny Hooley asked me if we have any more rural congregations in our conference in the Goshen-Elkhart area? Since another one of the rural congregations voted last weekend to leave Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference, I could only think of one: Bonneyville.

I think this breaking up of Indiana-Michigan should lead us to do some soul searching. Sure, we can say those congregations who left us are at fault. But was their leaving inevitable. Could it have been avoided? Could we have been more gracious and capacious so that people with differences might have decided to stay in spite of our differences, stay on the basis of what unites us rather than divides us?

I wonder too, now that they've left, what responsibility we have toward them. Are there other ways in which we can have fellowship with these churches, be reconciled to them? Might it actually be easier to have fellowship with them now that we're not in the same conference with each other?

I recently heard Jes Stoltzfus Buller tell about her courtship to her eventual husband. He being Pentecostal and she Mennonite, they had protracted theological arguments. They finally broke up, but continued to be friends. When they were no longer in a romantic relationship, they found it easier to talk about their differences. Eventually, they resumed their courtship and got married.

I wonder if something like this could happen were we to try to reestablish relationships with these congregations. Not being in the same conference, we can let go of certain expectations of each other. Perhaps we could find more common ground with each other under different circumstances. I don't know. It's just a thought.

Our church is divided.

Our world is divided.

The earth is out of sorts.

What is more needed than the gospel of reconciliation?