

3.27.2022 Lent 4

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Joshua 5:9-12, 17-18; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“In Christ, there is a new creation!”

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

These past weeks, like you perhaps, as I have watched news about the war in the Ukraine the work of diplomats and ambassadors has been on my mind. In the relationships between nations, diplomats and ambassadors work to build lasting bonds of cultural and economic exchange, to repair broken relationships, and also to restore peace in times of war.

Diplomacy is one of the most challenging aspects of international relations, because it seeks to build community across cultural and linguistic *difference*, and even across ideological boundaries. Diplomats and ambassadors do not represent their own personal thoughts and opinions; rather, they represent the views of their governments and the will of people of their nations.

It is my fervent prayer that the world’s diplomats, ambassadors and their governments will be able to continue to work for peace in Ukraine and to support the massive humanitarian crisis brought about by the Russian government’s unjust invasion and attempted annexation of a sovereign nation.

In today’s second reading, Paul’s use of the term translated as “*ambassadors for Christ*” reminds me that the public witness of the church in the world is very similar to what diplomats and ambassadors do in the political arena. Paul writes, “*In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.*” Paul’s use of the word “ambassador” is a reminder that Christians have also been called to represent the kingdom of God in this world and to its people by revealing in word and deed Christ’s message of reconciliation.

Paul understood the reality of reconciliation in very real and personal terms. At one time, Paul was a Pharisee named “Saul,” who persecuted Christ’s church. Paul’s own foreign policy toward Jesus Christ was one of open and hostile aggression. Paul had been at war with Christ, and only the risen Christ could stop him. Paul understood that God’s forgiveness had given him a new identity as an ambassador for Christ, entrusted with God’s peaceful message of reconciliation for all people.

Paul’s language about being a “new creation” in Christ is perhaps one of the most profound metaphors and ideals in the New Testament. It means that accepted, forgiven and loved by God, we become something new. Saul’s name change to “Paul” represents his new identity and new creation in Christ.

As I said, the work of ambassadors and diplomats has been on my mind as I continue to watch world events unfold, because God is still involved in a bitter struggle between good and evil in this world. Our work as ambassadors for Christ's message of reconciliation is the crucial diplomatic work we do as Christians in this world. Our voices and hands are crucial in this work because "*God is making his appeal through us.*"

Paul's own conversion, forgiveness and acceptance by God are very similar to the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*, because like the wayward son, Paul was also transformed by God's forgiveness. However, this parable might actually be called the "Parable of the Loving Father," because the father's love is actually the center of the story.

This parable tells us much about the acceptance and forgiveness of God. In the parable, the father must have worried daily that his son was dead. Each day, perhaps, he looked out onto the horizon searching for his son. So great was the father's joy that when he saw his son, he didn't even give his son a chance to ask to be treated like one of the hired hands – before the son could say this, the father unconditionally forgave him. He treated his son as if he had never been away. By calling for a new robe, ring and sandals for the son, the father fully restored his son to honor and authority as a son in his family and as an heir of his kingdom.

In the same way that the father restored his son, Paul describes God's mission of love toward the world, "*In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.*" Paul is describing the same thing that Jesus describes in this parable: the unconditional love of God. Over and over in life we seek and we offer forgiveness that restores and reconciles our relationships. Over and over we forgive and are forgiven, and made into a new creation in Christ.

Paul knew about reconciliation, because Paul had also experienced the unconditional forgiveness of Jesus. This is what the English word "reconciliation" means – "to bring together again what had been separated." To be reconciled means that the relationship of two people, parties or nations is restored through the mediation of God in Christ Jesus, working through us.

In the current scenario in Ukraine, there is no reconciliation; there is only an attempt at forced annexation and subjugation. The sin of nationalism, of saying "my nation over every other nation," continues to separate, oppress and kill others. God's work of reconciliation is about bringing together a world that is continually being separated by hatred, discrimination, oppression, and war.

I get the feeling that the elder son in this parable probably did not want his brother to even come home, and now that he was home he would have wanted his brother to be treated as a hired hand, as a

second-class member of the household. We get the feeling that he would have been happy to oppress and subjugate his brother, never letting him forget his sin. He simply could not understand his father's love and forgiveness for the son who the father had thought was dead. In the parable, however, the father clearly told his elder son, "*Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.*"

It is interesting to me that the elder brother never refers to the younger son *as his own brother*. He seems incapable to saying "my brother," instead he says, "*But when this son of yours came back .. you killed the fatted calf for him!*" The elder brother views his membership in his father's house as something I can only call "exclusive," because the elder brother seeks to exclude his younger brother from sonship in his father's house. This is what nationalism looks like: it excludes others from membership in it. The parable teaches us that there is no exclusion in the father's kingdom; the love of the father is what reconciles the two estranged brothers.

This household of the father in the parable encompasses the entire world; it is the *oikos* or "household" of God, and we all belong to it. Those with whom we are on friendly terms, and those whom we may also have a hard time calling sisters and brothers: God calls all of us sons and daughters.

It is easy to see why this gospel reading is paired with Paul's reading about being ambassadors for Christ. Paul writes, "*in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.*" This is in essence what we do as Christians: we are called to unconditionally welcome others with the message of reconciliation. We are called to be ambassadors for Christ, and we have been given a message of reconciliation by which God is making an appeal through us. We, as individuals and as a church, must be able to see in our sisters and brothers of other nations, ethnicities, genders, identities – you name it, all of the categories of difference by which human beings separate and divide others – we must be able to see others as members of the household of God.

We cannot be like the older brother who did not rejoice when his dead brother came home. Today's readings are really "resurrection stories." Paul, the younger brother, the elder brother, and all of us have been reconciled with God through Christ and raised to new life. All of us are here in this congregation simply because of God's grace, love and welcome.

In Christ, we are a new creation! I pray for a resurrection story in our world today.

We are called to care about our sisters and brothers in this world.

Be ambassadors of peace, of love, and of God's grace for all people.

Live as new creations in Christ. Amen.