

WORSHIP

Sermon | 10.14.2018



The Fruit of Welcome

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Corinthians 5:16-21

Welcome, once more, to First Presbyterian Church. Today is an exciting day – it's a little different than normal...I'm not sure when the last time was that the pastors wore t-shirts and jeans in the pulpit...but it's been a while.

Today is our stewardship commitment Sunday – which means we are all invited to offer our financial support of the church and its ministry through a pledge card which we will collect after worship. I'll tell you a little bit more about all of that in a few minutes. But today is also a time when we won't just fill out a card to demonstrate our commitment, but we will use our bodies to serve. There are a variety of ways we will do that – outside the church and inside – off campus and on. All are invited, even if you didn't sign up. You can check out the back of your bulletin for a list of service projects and, again, I will say a word about how to get from these pews to those projects in just a few minutes.

Now, though, I want to invite you to listen to some more of God's word in Scripture. In our first Scripture, we heard what is the heart of the good news of the gospel – the story of Jesus' resurrection that reveals God's victory over all things...even the power of death.

Our second reading is from the second letter Paul writes to a church that he helped start in Corinth. And although Paul doesn't write with stewardship Sunday in mind, he does write to paint a picture of what our lives are like when we are gathered as a community in Christ. For all of us who support the church - our giving enables us to welcome people into this way of living...this new reality in Christ. It is kind of the essence of why we are here.

So listen with me for a word from God.

+ + +

From 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. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has



become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, 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; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

+ + +

On the Sundays she welcomed new members into our church, our (now, former) associate pastor, Katelyn Gordon would say something I love. After she introduced our new members, she would tell them that their “new church family promises to be as functional as their biological family was functional.”

I had a habit of watching the new members as they heard Katelyn say that – and, many times, they laughed...and then, sometimes, I caught a few of their eyes getting big as I can imagine they pictured their families of origin and thought... “O, wow...really?”

Really.

People join the church for lots of reasons.

Many times it is because of the music that helps them feel closer to God.

Other times it because of how the church talks about what it believes – what it stands for.

Sometimes it is because of the community – the feel of the place.

Sometimes it’s a program for the kids. Or a dynamic youth group. Or a preschool.

There are lots of reasons...most of them really good.

But one reason you should never, ever have for joining a church is because you think it’s perfect.

Or even convenient.

Or maybe even normal.

Because, really, think about what we do here.

In the midst of an increasingly fast-paced world that keeps us so busy that we have less and less time to spend it even with the people who live under our own roofs – we take time to gather here together as a church family who are far flung over the growing city of Charlotte.

And, it’s true, we might look pretty similar (especially today if you are wearing your new FPC t-shirt!), but there’s actually a lot of difference in our congregation. Different ages and stages.

Different backgrounds.



Different opinions about politics and God and how or whether to bring those into conversation.

We come together – amidst our difference – and in the swift current of a culture that keeps pushing us to **do more** and **be more** and **want more** – and we slow down. We worship...and we pray...and we learn...and we serve...and we take time to care...and connect...and seek after the good of our city and our world...and ask difficult questions...and work for change that is so often unbelievably incremental.

It is church. And while it's not perfect...so much of it is beautiful. And kind of different and maybe even a little strange...when you compare it to what the rest of the world is doing on a Sunday morning.

But don't you know it brings life?

Deep down that's the real reason why we are here.

Faith helps us experience what the Bible calls **abundant** life.

A life that takes its shape around Jesus Christ – who loved us to the end – and beyond it.

Jesus, whose life, death, and resurrection usher in a new kind of reality – and gives us a reason to hope past the places that feel hopeless – and invites us to see the world from a new perspective – one of grace and mercy and forgiveness.

You see, that's what Paul was talking about when he wrote this letter to his church.

He wanted to make sure the members of his church understood **who they really were** as a part of the church family...the Christian community...

From now on, Paul wrote, we regard no one from a human point of view...So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

What is it to be a part of the body of Christ that is the church?

It is to be a new creation.

Washed clean. Restored.

And empowered to be an ambassador for Christ.

Given the ministry of reconciliation.

That is – given the mandate to look beyond the brokenness of what we see and have a vision for the world that God intends...and trust in that...and then to work for it.

+ + +



But before we can be effective ambassadors for Christ, given this ministry of reconciliation, we first have to trust that we really are reconciled to God.

Over the past few weeks at my house, Lindsey and I have been introducing our three youngest kids to the magic of Harry Potter. On Friday we finished reading the first book in the series and treated ourselves to watching the movie (which came out twenty years ago!).

One of the pieces of magic that Harry Potter stumbles across in that first book is a full-length mirror called the “Mirror of Erised.” And what Harry realizes is that when he looks in it, he doesn’t a reflection of himself as he is – with imperfections, insecurities, doubts, and grief. Rather, when he looks into the mirror he sees himself as he wants be. Professor Dumbledore explains to Harry that the happiest person on earth would be able to look into the mirror and see himself exactly as they are, but for those who are not satisfied with who they are, they can be tempted to waste their lives away by looking into the mirror to find something better. Every week, when we come to this place, we hear that “as far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our sins from us through Jesus Christ.” Every week, we say “in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.”

But how often do we then go home and look at ourselves in the mirror and see disappointment, and regret, and brokenness? How much of our life do we waste away trying to be something different, something more, something better?

The good news of the gospel is that when God looks into our faces, God doesn’t see brokenness...God doesn’t wish for something else...something different...something more.

What God sees in us is a new creation!

That is the gift of Christ’s life and death...we are reconciled to God.

Full stop. You – as you are – are reconciled to God. That is how God sees you.

So the only question is, can you see yourself that way? And can you trust that?

Because God needs us to.

We’ve been given the ministry of reconciliation – the task of helping mend what is broken – and for us to believe that is possible, it starts with believing it about ourselves.

+ + +

A pastor friend told me a story about someone who knew what it was to practice the ministry of reconciliation. To have enough vision and imagination and hope to look beyond the brokenness we see to glimpse world as God desires it.

Vedran Smailovic was the principal cellist in the Sarajevo Philharmonic Orchestra at the time that his country fell into a civil war in the early 1990s. On May 27, 1992 bombs were dropping



on the city – and one fell outside of Smailovic’s widow in the middle of a town square where hungry people were lined up for food.

22 people perished. Their deaths reminding us of the depths of the world’s brokenness...the capacity for human sin. The blast left a hole in the ground.

The next day, on May 28th, and for twenty-one consecutive days afterwards, Smailovic emerged from his apartment at 4:00 in the afternoon dressed in his concert tails. He climbed down into the crater left by the bomb and placed a stool where he played his cello.

It was just music.

But it sang of life.

It sang of hope being stronger than fear.

Of good being stronger than evil.

Of the old passing away and everything becoming new.

Of course, it was more than just music.

It was an act of reconciliation; of putting aside enmity and retaliation in favor of life and hope.

Most of us, thanks be to God, won’t have to function as ambassadors for Christ in that kind of environment – carrying a ministry of reconciliation into such incredible pain.

But all of us who follow Jesus as Lord are called to see the world right in front of us with new eyes – to see it as a new creation.

To see a world where everyone has a decent place to call a home.

To see a world where mothers and daughters, fathers and sons find love where there was mistrust.

A world where children have a chance to learn – unencumbered by the barriers of inequality and lack of opportunity.

A world where people are valued because of their intrinsic worth rather than by what they produce.

To see a world where abuse and harassment are considered the former things.

A world where cooperation and mutuality guide our public life.

Can you imagine that kind of world?

And – even in your day-to-day life, when you bump into places where the world isn’t yet what it can be – do you have the faith, the trust, the peace, the hope to remember that it will be?

Because that is the work of the church: To look upon ourselves, one another, and this world from the perspective of the God who makes all things new.



That is the life into which you have been welcomed.

And the invitation our church extends to all those who hunger for life.

We have been given the ministry of reconciliation.

There is no higher calling.

Or privilege.

Or joy.

