

DON'T BE A STRANGER

Psalm 32 / 2 Cor. 5:16-21

When I get to preside at the font to pronounce the *Assurance of Pardon* after we confess our sins before God and one another, I often use Paul's words from 2 Corinthians which we just read: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old life is gone, (everything old has passed away), and a new life has begun (everything has become new)." Being made aware that we have been reconciled to God in Christ, we then turn to each other with the words, and with a gesture of being reconciled to each other, saying, "The Peace of Christ be with you." This is a liturgical enactment, if you will, of this very passage in 2 Corinthians—one which we repeat every Sunday with the passing of the peace because we know of our great need and God's abundant mercy.

As creatures, we are estranged from our Creator, yet in Christ we are strangers no more. As Jesus reminds us in John's gospel: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father (Jn. 15:15)." But what does it mean exactly to be "in Christ," to be "a new creation?" The late Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth has provided as good an approximation to

that question as I know how. Note that I did not say an answer, but an approximation. He wrote:

“Jesus was not in any sense a reformer championing new orders against old ones, contesting the latter in order to replace them by the former. He did not range himself and his disciples with any of the existing parties. Jesus did not identify with the Pharisees. Nor did he set up against them an opposing party. He did not represent or defend or champion any program—whether political, economic, moral or religious, whether conservative or progressive. He was equally disliked by the representatives of all such programs, although he did not particularly attack any of them. Why his existence was so unsettling on every side was that he set all programs and principles in question. ... Jesus simply revealed the limit and frontier of all things—the freedom of the kingdom of God. Jesus simply existed in this freedom and summoned to it.”

I love one of Barth's phrases in particular: “Jesus revealed the limit and frontier of all things—the freedom of the kingdom of God.” I love it because it challenges all our notions of what we think freedom means: Freedom of speech, freedom of assembling for worship, freedom from another country's unprovoked aggression, freedom to live and move and have our being. But Jesus's notion of the freedom of God's kingdom does much

more than simply challenge all our concepts and understandings, as Barth reminds us. If Jesus would only challenge our concepts, then “freedom” would not amount to much more than an intellectual exercise.

In other words, enacting freedom only liturgically in the safety of our sanctuary—the limit per Barth— is one thing. And it is an important thing. It’s a first step. But then to leave the sanctuary and live into this new reality—the frontier per Barth— is a whole different ballgame. “In Christ, God was reconciling the cosmos to himself, not counting our trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making an appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: Be reconciled to God!”

When we acknowledge together that we are strangers to God, to one another, and even to ourselves each Sunday morning, we acknowledge this freedom of God’s kingdom. When we try to be reconciled to God, to one another, and even to ourselves in our daily living, we fulfill the second step of which Paul speaks: we discover that freedom is not only *freedom from*, but, perhaps even more importantly, *freedom for*. You see, freedom is not something we get to define. It is a precious, fragile gift which God gives us each day, like manna in the wilderness. When we are freed from our own wants, wishes and desires, as Doug preached about last week, we are

called do something with this freedom—and to do something which is in accordance with God's desire for the entire cosmos: we are called to be God's, and Christ's, ambassadors to the entire cosmos. This is how God makes God's appeal to the world: *Through* us. It's a huge assignment!

Where to begin? Well, really, wherever we want. *We can start with ourselves.* We can ask ourselves how we are estranged from God and how we can heal this relationship. It has happened to me many times in my ministry—as it has in the ministry of every pastor I know—that I meet people in a non-church setting like at the grocery store, or in a restaurant, or at the gas station. And without fail, people will often start the conversation by saying: “Oh I know I haven't been in church for a while, but” I find it had to respond to this because it's not for me to judge why folks do or don't go to church. But Paul would say to them, “Be reconciled to God.” And coming to church might be a good starting point in this process of reconciliation.

Or we can start with one another. We can ask ourselves how we are estranged from one another and how we can heal these relationships. What about that phone call to a friend, a brother, sister, child, or parent, we have been meaning to make for a while? Or the invitation for dinner we meant to extend to a new neighbor? We can intentionally meet people of

other faiths or of other political or religious persuasions. Or reach out to other nations for a better understanding. When we are reconciled to God, we are free to do any and all of the above. And we help build God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven as ambassadors of God's love, mercy and grace for all people.

Or we can begin with God. However, no matter where or with whom we begin, Paul entreats us: "On Behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God!"

Now, this call to live ever more deeply into the freedom of the kingdom of God bears a special significance for us Presbyterians. The Greek word for ambassador is "*presbuteros*." Of course, it does not mean "Presbyterian." Rather it means that God sends us as God's emissaries into the cosmos—the frontier— which God loves so fiercely. It means that you and I are sent with a job to do as agents of reconciliation, making friends with all we meet on behalf of Christ. And it means that you and I are authorized to go into this, God's world, to do this job as ambassadors "extraordinary and plenipotentiary." For blessed are the ones who bring good news to a world in dire need of reconciliation.

So, don't be a stranger. Claim the freedom you have received in your baptism and live into this freedom in order to mend a broken world and contribute to the reconciliation of all things to God.

May it be so, for you and for me. Amen.

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