

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 23, 2018**

FORWARD IN RECONCILIATION

Romans 5:10-11:2; 2 Corinthians 5:18-6:2; Ephesians 2:13-18

My original intent was to focus today on the theme of reconciliation, which is the main emphasis of the Scripture passages we just read, because in a world of fractured relationships, in a world infected – or infested – with sin at every level, our great need is for reconciliation. Our greatest need is to be reconciled to God and then to be reconciled to others. In and through the person and work of His Son Jesus Christ, God invites us to be reconciled to Him – to be restored to a right relationship of friendship, of peace and communion with Him.

But instead of talking in detail about reconciliation, I want to pick up where we left off last Sunday in talking about the mission God has given to each of us and to us as a church to be Christ's ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20) – witnesses to the message and power of His saving love (Acts 1:8) – representing Jesus in our everyday world, introducing people around us and, through our support of missions and missionaries, people all around the world to Him.

OLD TESTAMENT AMBASSADORS

Think with me for a few minutes about some of the people God used in the Bible. Last Sunday I mentioned four of God's ambassadors in the Old Testament: Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Jonah. There were lots of others in the Old Testament, like Elijah, Ezekiel, Hosea and the rest of the "Minor Prophets," including Amos, a shepherd and farmer from the town of Tekoa, to whom the Lord said: "Go, prophesy to my people Israel" (Amos 7:14-15). So Amos went, telling the self-satisfied, complacent people of Israel, among other things, to "prepare to meet your God" (4:12) and to "let justice roll down like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24). Amos was, from all appearances, just a regular, ordinary man whom God used in an anything-but-ordinary way as His messenger or ambassador.

NEW TESTAMENT AMBASSADORS

In the New Testament we have a plethora of examples, such as:

- John the Baptist, ordained by God to "prepare the way" for the coming of the Savior (Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4). When Jesus came onto the scene, John said of Him: "Look!" – There He is! – "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29; cf. 1:35). The whole point of John's ministry was to point people to Jesus.
- Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. After meeting Jesus, "the first thing Andrew did was to find his brother (and fishing partner) Simon and tell him: 'We have found the Messiah.' And he (Andrew) brought him (Simon Peter) to Jesus" (John 1:41-42). The ripple effects of Andrew's simple act continue today. He told his brother about Jesus and then brought him to meet the Savior. Is that so hard? I think a lot of times we make it harder than it is.

- Four unnamed friends who were willing to do whatever they could, including cutting a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus was staying in Capernaum, in order to bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus, who proceeded to heal the man both physically *and* spiritually (Mark 2:1-12).
- Matthew, the tax-collector turned disciple, who invited his friends – a bunch of fellow tax-collectors and other “sinners” – to a dinner party at his house in order to introduce them to Jesus (Matthew 9:9-10).
- Andrew’s brother, Simon, renamed Peter (“the Rock”) by Jesus. Peter became the chief spokesman for the followers of Jesus, the go-to guy for the spread of the gospel message after the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2). When Peter and John (the apostle, not John the Baptist) were arrested by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem for their persistence in telling people about Jesus, and were ordered to stop what they were doing, they said; “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20). As Jesus’ witnesses, they were compelled to do what witnesses do – to tell others about Him.
- Philip, who was sent by the Lord to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, where he met the Secretary of the Treasury in the government of Queen Candace of Ethiopia (Acts 8:26-27). This government official was reading Scripture – from Isaiah 53 – but didn’t understand what it meant. So “Philip began with that passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus” (8:35). As a result, the government official believed the gospel and was baptized.
- Paul, the greatest Christian missionary in New Testament times *and* in the history of the world. On his way to Jerusalem where he would be arrested and thrown in prison, he said to the elders from the church in Ephesus: “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24). God may or may not ask you and me to personally take the gospel to faraway places like Paul, but “the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace” still belongs to us. Right here where we live and work and go to school and shop and hang out and worship.
- The Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42). She was not exactly the model of a virtuous woman. This was a woman with a past. She had been married five times and was now living with a man to whom she was not married (4:18). But meeting Jesus, discovering who He was (is) and that He cared for her, just as she was, changed her life. She left her water jar at the well, went back into town and said to everybody: “Come see a man who knew all about the things I did, who knows me inside and out. Do you think this could be the Messiah?” (4:29, *MSG*). So the people went out to see for themselves (4:30), with the result that many of the Samaritans from that town (Sychar) believed in Jesus because of the woman’s witness (4:39). Just another ordinary person who became an ambassador for Jesus.

You are not the woman at the well. You are not Paul or Philip or Peter or John or Matthew or Andrew or John the Baptist. You are not one of the four guys who brought their needy friend to Jesus. You are not Amos or any of the prophets through whom God spoke in the Old Testament. But I believe God wants to use you – and me – just as He used them. I believe God wants to use our church in this community at this time to show and tell the message of

the gospel in order to point unbelievers to Jesus and invite them to follow Him in faith. If God could use someone like Amos or Andrew or Matthew, if God could use someone like Mary Magdalene (the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus) or the Samaritan woman at the well, He can use you and me. He can use our church to impact this community where He has placed us with the gospel.

Do you believe that?

Will you let God use you?

Will you say, as Isaiah did: “Here am I, Lord. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:3)?

SOMEBODY INTRODUCED YOU TO JESUS

Somebody, somewhere, at some point in your life, told you about Jesus. Maybe it was one or both of your parents, or a grandparent. Maybe it was a Sunday School teacher. Maybe it was a pastor or a youth leader, a friend or a classmate, a teammate or a coach, a neighbor or someone at work. Unless you’re hearing about Him today for the first time, somebody, somewhere, sometime, has told you about Jesus. Jesus wants you to pass it on to somebody else. Jesus wants you to pass it on to other people in your life. Like “the madman” (Mark 5:2, *MSG*) whom Jesus healed and restored to his right mind – I didn’t mention him before – Jesus wants you to “go home to your family [and friends] and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and how He has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19). What Jesus has done in your life may not be as dramatic as it was in the case of this “madman” who was possessed and controlled by a “legion” of demons, but it is just as real. It is just as true. It is just as miraculous. Because it is only by the miraculous power of God’s love that anyone can be saved. It is always a miracle. It is a miracle of God’s grace that comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will.

God used somebody – maybe a whole bunch of somebodies – to introduce you to Jesus and bring you to faith in Him. And He wants to use you, whether alone or in concert with others, to introduce your unbelieving friends, neighbors, family members, classmates, or colleagues to Him. He wants to use *us*. He wants to use *our church* as His ambassadors in Kingstowne and beyond. Let Him use you. Let’s let Him use us.

Reaching out in friendship, hospitality, and compassion to our neighbors in practical ways is absolutely required. We’ve got to find ways to make connections and develop relationships with unbelievers in our community and in the neighborhoods where we live. Reaching out is something we must do as Jesus’ ambassadors and witnesses. But there is more to our mission than reaching out.

THREE DEFINITIONS

Ken Priddy from the GO Center in Richmond, who has twice presented seminars here at Faith, provides helpful definitions of three key words in understanding the Great Commission

and how it is to get worked out in the life of our church. The key words are *outreach*, *evangelism*, and *discipleship*.

Outreach, he says, is *the strategic connecting of people in the congregation with people outside the congregation for the purpose of building sustainable relationships. It is these sustainable relationships that give opportunity to evangelism.*

Evangelism is the strategic connecting of people outside the Christian faith with a ... clear presentation of the gospel, including an opportunity to respond to the call of the gospel. If the gospel has not been made clear, evangelism has not happened.

Many churches, Priddy says, have greatly increased outreach in recent years. This is good news. It is a good thing.

The bad news is that many churches mistake outreach for evangelism. Consequently, the gospel is not being presented clearly.

Discipleship is developing (individuals) in (their) Christian faith with an emphasis on obedience to all that Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:20). The objective of discipleship is not [merely] increased knowledge or moral improvement – as desirable as these are. The objective is true life transformation seen in behaviors and not simply in theological or doctrinal understanding, in orthopraxis and not simply in orthodoxy (Priddy, G.O.1: Building Your Church's Great Commission Matrix, 44).

Orthopraxis means “right living.” *Orthodoxy* means “right belief.” We need to be concerned about both. One without the other is not what Jesus desires in your life or mine. Beliefs and behavior – the witness of your life and the witness of your words – both matter.

The main point I want you to see from this is that outreach – making connections and developing relationships with people outside the church – is good. It is necessary. It is important. It is high priority. But it is not the same as evangelism. It provides opportunities for evangelism. It provides opportunities for us to tell others about Jesus and what He has done in our lives. It provides opportunities for us to present the gospel. But, as valuable and necessary as it is, outreach is not the same as evangelism. It is not the same as actually sharing the gospel and inviting others to trust in Jesus and Him alone for salvation.

HOW TO SHARE JESUS WITHOUT FEAR

Bill Fay, the author of a book entitled *Share Jesus Without Fear*, suggests five “Share Jesus Questions” you can ask in conversation with just about anyone. The five questions are:

1. Do you have any kind of spiritual beliefs?
2. To you, who is Jesus Christ?
3. Do you believe in heaven or hell?
4. If you were to die today, where would you go? If heaven, why? This is very similar to one of the Coral Ridge *Evangelism Explosion* questions.
5. If what you believe is not true, would you want to know?

(William Fay, *Share Jesus Without Fear*, 33-36)

If the person you're talking with says "yes" to the last question, you have permission to begin telling him or her the good news of who Jesus is, what He has done for us, and how we – including the person you're talking with, regardless of their past or present – can be reconciled to God, have their sins forgiven, have peace with God and peace in their heart, and receive the gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

Bill Fay doesn't use these questions to get into an argument. When he asks about a person's spiritual beliefs or what they believe about Jesus, he doesn't tell them they are wrong or dispute what they say. He simply says: "Hmmm," as if to say: "That's very interesting. Thanks for sharing that with me." He doesn't talk about his beliefs until he has established a connection with the person and received permission to share the message of the gospel. But when he does receive permission, he doesn't waste the opportunity.

This is a simple method that perhaps you can put into practice in your life. Five questions to ask of people whose spiritual condition you are concerned about: Here they are again:

1. Do you have any kind of spiritual beliefs? If it is someone you know well, you may not need to ask this question.
2. To you, who is Jesus? You may get a doctrinal or theological answer, or a personal answer that points to a personal relationship with Jesus, or both.
3. Do you believe in heaven or hell?
4. If you were to die today, where would you go? If heaven, why?
5. If what you believe is not true, would you want to know?

I encourage you to try to work these questions into at least one conversation with someone this week. You may be surprised at the doors God opens and the ways He can work through you. Just as He worked through ordinary men and women in the Old and New Testaments to get His message out. And to change lives.

RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel message. In general terms, reconciliation is about the restoration of friendly relations or unity where there has been a disruption, a falling-out, a breakdown or estrangement in a relationship. We, and all of humankind, have been estranged from God because of our sin, our turning away from God, our rebellion against Him. Our sin and our natural-born sinfulness have poisoned our relationship with God. We need to be reconciled to God. We need to be restored to a right relationship with God. But we are powerless to do what is needed to bring us back into a right relationship with God. We are powerless to solve the problem of our sin. So God Himself has taken on the work of reconciliation. He has taken the initiative to reconcile us to Himself. "All this," says Paul, "is from God" – who did what? – "who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting our sins against us. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

A SINGULAR SOLUTION

There is only one way for us – for *anyone* – to be reconciled to God. In his book *The Story of Reality*, Gregory Koukl gives an analogy to drive home this point. “Most ailments,” he says, “need particular antidotes. Increasing the air pressure in your tires will not fix (your) carburetor. Aspirin will not dissolve a tumor. Cutting up credit cards will not wipe out debt that is already owed. If your water pipes are leaking, you call a plumber, not an oncologist, but a plumber will not cure a cancer. Any adequate solution must solve the problem that needs to be solved, and singular problems need singular solutions. Some antidotes are one-of-a-kind cures for one-of-a-kind ailments. Sometimes only one medicine will do the job, as much as we may like it to be otherwise. Humankind faces a singular problem. People are broken and the world is broken because our friendship with God has been broken, ruined by human rebellion. Humans, you and I – are guilty, enslaved, lost, dead. All of us. Everyone. Everywhere. The guilt must be punished, the debt must be paid, the slave must be purchased. Promising better conduct in the future will not mend the crimes of the past. No, a rescuer must ransom the slaves, a kindred brother must pay the family debt, a substitute must shoulder the guilt. There is no other way of escape” (Gregory Koukl, *The Story of Reality*, 131-132).

A singular problem requires a singular solution. The Bible declares that there is only one solution to the problem of our estrangement, our separation from God. There is only one way for us – for *anyone* – to be reconciled to God, only one way to be restored to friendly relations with God. How? In and through Jesus. By what means? By means of His blood. By means of His sacrificial death on the cross as our substitute, taking the punishment for our sins upon Himself, as an expression of the depth of His love for a world of sinners like you and me.

Jesus did this *for us*. Now He gives us this *ministry* and this *message* of reconciliation to take with us into our everyday world to pass on to people in this community and everywhere who need to be reconciled to Him.

Jesus came and died to reconcile us to God. Be reconciled to God through Him.

Jesus has given us the ministry and message of reconciliation to share with others. And to do so without fear. Be His ministers, His messengers, His agents, His ambassadors of reconciliation.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.