

Ambassadors of Christ

Scripture: II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 (NRSV)

Date: February 17, 2021

Message: *O we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

It is no wonder this passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians so often appears in our lectionary to initiate the Lenten season. It begins with a call to fellow "ambassadors on behalf of Christ" to "be reconciled to God" so as to "become the righteousness of God" (II Corinthians 5:20-21). Since separation from God is the root of all sin and sin is ever present, reconciliation necessarily describes an ongoing process of repentance (turning back) and restoring right relationship with God. We are all works in progress! However, during the Lenten season we are summoned to practice spiritual disciplines - such as prayer, meditation, self-denial, fasting, acts of charity - to help us reconcile with God through Christ, "who knew no sin" (5:21). We engage in the discipline of self-examination of conscience to focus on our behaviors and motives, to discern our "stumbling blocks" (6:3), and to repent of those obstructing our missional purpose as disciples of Christ. No doubt, gluttony and sloth engendered by months of pandemic isolation will be popular sins to repent this year! But let's not trivialize solemn Lenten practices of repentance and self-sacrifice as solipsistic New Year's resolutions.

Reconciliation with God and others must be a collective endeavor and Paul warns: "Working together, we entreat that you not receive the grace of God in vain" (6:1). Indeed, Paul's epistle is addressed to the church in Corinth that was beset by division and conflict and in need of immediate reconciliation. Does this description of a church in crisis sound familiar? After all, many of our congregations remain divided by the rampant political factionalism of the last election. The pandemic and subsequent economic decline have resulted in fear and despair. Many of us remain isolated at home - separated from communal worship and the ministries of our local churches. We have become alienated from God and our purpose in the world. The urgency of Paul's plea is amplified by the imperative - "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (6:2).

During Lent, we begin to see the dawning of hope and the promise of healing after a long, dark winter night. Now is the time to transcend our alienation through reconciliation with God and others. It's time for transformation and renewal of the Church as we journey towards a 'new normal' of discipleship. Now is the time to fulfill our missional purpose as ambassadors of Christ by embodying God's righteousness - "purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love"- (6:6) in the world.

Prayer: *Gracious God grant us the courage, strength, and faith to become ambassadors of Christ and embody your righteousness and justice in the world. Amen.*