

The Ministry of Reconciliation
2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2
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This past Monday night, I hosted our first outdoor college gathering of the summer with 15 students including one recent college graduate. I must say, the opportunity to maintain our connection to students who have grown up in this congregation has been one



of the unexpected gifts of the pandemic. But as meaningful as our Zoom conversations were throughout the school year, it really was great to be together in person.

And if one of my neighbors had driven by at just the right time, they might have been a little puzzled to see us sitting in a circle in my yard, under the beautiful night sky, with our eyes closed and our hands in identical positions, perhaps like this...or this...this...this...or this for a few minutes at a time. We were listening to a guided meditation together on making the sign of the cross. I had encountered it earlier in the summer in a podcast I was making my way through and it so moved me that I wanted to share it with others. At each movement, the Catholic priest leading the meditation invited us to breathe in the blessing of God and breathe out the fear and whatever is not of God; to make the connection that we don't just love God with our mind, but also with our heart; to bring before God our past and our present and to be aware that God is as near to us as our very breath.

As someone who has mainly waded in Protestant waters, it can be refreshing to be exposed to practices that invite us to say with our bodies what we believe and feel with our mind and heart. And honestly, I think it's good for us as Christians to be willing to be perceived as a little weird from time to time. So far, I have not received any concerned emails from neighbors worrying that I am starting a cult in their backyard.

In 2 Corinthians in general, and in this passage in particular, there seems to be some issue with how the Corinthian church is perceiving Paul. He is not the apostle they expected and maybe not even the one they wanted. He seems a little weird to them and Paul sounds like he is a little bit on the defensive here. This could be why he uses the pronoun “we” instead of “I” when self-referring in this letter more than any other letter of his. It’s as if to say it’s not just me guys! There’s others who are with me!

We are well known to God, I hope **we** are also known to you. **We** are giving you a chance to boast about **us** to those who boast in outward appearances rather than the heart. **We** may seem beside ourselves, out of our right minds. **We** used to regard others, even Christ, from a human point of view but we do so no longer.

Paul, in several ways, is simply saying that there was a way he used to perceive the world and those around him. It’s still the way that most people see things. Looking at appearances; valuing things like material success and power. But something happened to radically transform everything. Jesus died and was raised. Because of that, everything has changed and Paul desperately wants to get the Corinthians to come along with him and leave behind the old way of seeing. He so desperately wants this that he proclaims his message in just about every way he can think of.

Verse 15 - Jesus died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. Verse 17 - If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! Verse 19 - in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. Verse 21 - For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. I mean, this is like Paul’s greatest hits in the span of just a few verses!

The driving force behind all of this is the love of Christ. Paul says in verse 14 that it is the love of Christ which urges us on and so however it is that Paul seems strange to the Corinthians, it is because the love of Christ has so transformed him, he no longer fits in the old patterns of the world. And that is his desire for them as well.

Paul paints this amazing picture of what God was doing in Christ that is both personal, in that Christ died for each of us, but also cosmic. If anyone is in Christ, there isn’t just a new creature, there is a new creation.

The transformation begun in Christ’s death and resurrection manifests in individuals’ lives, yes, but it will expand and grow until it encompasses everything.

All of the different ways Paul can think to articulate this amazing work of God reach a crescendo in the theme of reconciliation. In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself and is now entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. Entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. I like running with New Testament scholar Richard Hays’ suggestion of a more literal translation of this verse: God is placing in us the word

of reconciliation. What he suggests Paul means is that “the word is implanted in us in such a way that we come to embody the word of reconciliation. We don’t just announce it; we embody it.” In other words, we don’t just deliver the message of reconciliation, our very lives are the message.

I think that’s what I find so powerful about making the sign of the cross as a faith practice. It takes what we believe about what God was doing in Christ, and it puts it on our bodies, which then reminds us that as we make our way through the world we are called to embody Christ’s reconciling love in our own dying and rising. As we bear the sign of the cross in the world we recall the vertical dimension of God reconciling us through Christ. Because of the way love and grace work, that vertical dimension overflows to open up the horizontal, where we work together with God in the ministry of the reconciliation of all things.

The scope of this ministry is nearly boundless. It is as wide as the world God is making new. If the trajectory is everything being made new, then the ministry of reconciliation is equally expansive because the effects of sin are so pervasive. We carry out the ministry of reconciliation when we refuse to perpetuate a conflict in a relationship. We carry out this ministry when we see others no longer from a human point of view, but see each person we encounter as someone for whom Christ died, because that is what they truly are! We carry out this ministry when we are faithful stewards of the earth because God is not discarding creation but is making it new.

We carry out this ministry when we pursue justice of every kind because the same word that is translated as righteousness in verse 21 is also translated as justice so that when Paul says that Christ become sin for our sake so that we might become the righteousness of God, we cannot separate righteousness from justice.

Friends, we are ambassadors for Christ, ambassadors of reconciliation and God makes his appeal to the world through us. Think about that! What will the world see and hear? When they look at our lives, may they see the sign of the cross writ large and may they hear the message that they are reconciled to God through Christ, that everything old has passed away, see everything has become new. Amen.

Resources

<https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/practices-for-pandemic-ep-1-sign-cross-fr-michael-sparough/id1476002283?i=1000469041482>

<https://faithandleadership.com/word-reconciliation>