

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 NRSVUE

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 no longer know him in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! 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. For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Rev. Heather Sparkman: Being a part of community is not an easy task.

Whether it is the community we find with our family, our neighborhood, our church, our children's school, our civic life, or our friendships, people are people which means we rub against each other. Just think of the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday! You might already be dreading conflict that has the potential to arise in your family.

Paul, who wrote the words we read this morning, knew this. His ministry was one of church planting so he traveled the ancient near east establishing churches and then would entrust leadership to someone and travel to the next place to start another church.

You might imagine that people were enthusiastic about the gospel when Paul came and first preached it. What good news!

God loves us enough to send his son, and his son healed people, embraced the outcast, overturned power structures, and rose from death! To be a part of a community centered around that kind of love? Well, we know how that can speak to the deepest part of our souls.

Perhaps Paul hoped that as he planted these churches, and developed the leaders that would carry on the work after he left, that his task would be over. The people would carry on in gospel bliss, loving God, each other, and the wider world with no problems whatsoever.

Alas, so much of our New Testament Scripture comes from the letters Paul wrote to the communities he founded to help them work through problems that arose after he departed.

At first glance, it is a bit odd to think that so much of our Holy book, our unique Scriptures that we as Christians share with no one else, is devoted to this working out of conflict between church people.

Aren't we supposed to be loving, kind, gentle, forgiving, good-natured, humble, patient, joyful people?

Yes. And, unfortunately, the hearing of the gospel, our baptism even, does not instantly confer these characteristics upon us.

Our faith journey, the life of a disciple, a follower of Jesus, is to be formed into Christ-likeness. This is what discipleship is. We give our lives to Christ and then we allow God to do the transforming work within us so that the image of God within us emerges into the light.

Paul describes this in the Scripture as saying, **So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!**

When we follow Christ we are a new creation and the process of coming into being, of becoming Christ-like begins.

So much of this happens in community, specifically in the church community. As Americans we often think of our faith as ours alone. It is

between us and God. There is an element of that. No one can force us to give our hearts to Jesus and we are responsible for our own faith journey.

But God's plan for the people of God has always been community. We can stretch back to the people of Israel and see that God was forming the people in community. Jesus gathered 12 disciples and they learned to follow him in community with each other. Paul establishes churches and then instructs them via letter on what it looks like to become disciples of Christ in relationship with each other.

In this letter, to the church at Corinth, Paul writes to them after the church has been in direct conflict with Paul. They have started to value worldly marks of success and doubted Paul's authority because he didn't have wealth and power.

This letter, which is probably not the actual second letter he wrote them, is one of reconciliation. He will forgive them, but he also counsels them throughout the letter on what it is to truly follow Jesus.

This actually gives us a model for community within the church. There is conflict and Paul works to resolve it with the people of Corinth. There is forgiveness and reconciliation, which Paul says is the ministry we have inherited from Jesus. Then, there is instruction or teaching, which is meant to help the people grow in their faith and Christ-likeness.

Paul is clear, in the excerpt of the Scripture we read, that this ministry of reconciliation is not limited to the church. We are ambassadors for Christ, he says, which means that we will be out in the world, where people do not know Christ, representing the way of Jesus.

Our ministry is never meant to stay within the walls of the church. And, what happens within the walls, behind the closed doors, matters because it is here in the church where we are formed as the people who will represent Christ to the world. The discipleship happens here so that we can be sent out to love our neighbors and the world.

Church is not meant to be conflict free. If it were to be so, church would be a community of one. I can get along with myself pretty well most days.

But I also get lonely and I don't grow very much when I am not surrounded by people. People with different life experiences, different habits, thought patterns, different models of conflict resolution, different customs, different personalities.

Church is not meant to be a homogenous echo chamber. It is meant to be a diverse community where we are all learning to love God and each other so that we can love the world well.

As John Wesley says, if we cannot think alike cannot we not love alike.

This means that we accept a great responsibility when we are a part of a church community. We accept the ministry of reconciliation that Christ has entrusted to us. We commit ourselves not just to Christ. We commit to work together, to care for each other, to love each other, to bear one another's burdens, and to reconcile with each other when there is conflict. We practice all of these things here, in the church community, so that we can be ambassadors for Christ in the world.

Your church council met for a leadership retreat last Saturday and articulated four priorities or practices, that are foundational to who we are here at FUMCO.

Two of the practices focus beyond our walls on our neighbors and how we serve.

- In relationship with, and in regular conversation with, our neighbors
- Practicing compassion and justice together

Two are internal because we can't love the world if we can't love each other and so the two internal practices are:

- Growing spiritually and developing disciples
- Cultivating true welcome and belonging

You are going to hear us talk about these four emphasis quite a bit in the coming months, centering on our internal work first. Paul, in this letter to the COrinthians, is really focused on making disciples, forming the people into

Christ-like people, in a Christ-centered community and then sending them into the world as ambassadors for Christ.

There are times when I long to be a part of the perfect community. Conflict free, harmonious, everyone getting along, filled with perfect people. There is a problem with that though. First, I wouldn't get to be a part of that community because I am not perfect. And, if I want everyone to be like me, I will end up in a community of one.

That is not what God intended for us. God intended that we grow in relationship with each other, that we grow in community. This is God's primary means of discipling or forming us. This gathered community. These people. We will not always get along. We will not always see eye to eye. We will trespass against each other. May Paul's words, and Jesus' example guide us towards spiritual formation and a ministry of reconciliation so that we can be ambassadors for Christ.

Rev. Alexa Eisenbarth: When I was a little kid, the woman who provided day care for me, started planning for and building a new house. I can see her so clearly standing over the dining room table, where blueprints were spread out across it. She'd be bent over, pouring meticulously over the details. And I'd look at the lines, and curves, and labels, and try to imagine how this would be a house. But I couldn't. She'd say, don't you think that there needs to be a bathroom here? And I would shrug - I don't know. I was young, so I couldn't grasp that someone decides where bathrooms are located in a home - it just always had been that bathrooms were wherever they were! But I also couldn't imagine the house not yet built. I couldn't imagine how it might function, how this family I knew could live there, instead of here in the place I stood with them. But she could. She could see, with great clarity, what her new creation would be.

In the same way, there are those who can not imagine the world differently than it is now, and there are those who can see the blueprints God is

drawing to establish the new creation. And this reality, that there are both kinds of people in every church, with two different perspectives, means that we must contend with difference, and learn to find harmony, rather than dissonance. And we do this *because* God has entrusted their message of reconciliation to us; *because* we are ambassadors for Christ.

It is our task to learn to live together “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Blue Letter Bible helps us define and clarify what is meant by “righteousness.” The primary definition reads, “in a broad sense: state of him who is as he ought to be, righteousness, the condition acceptable to God.” One nuance of this definition offers the word “integrity” as a synonym. It seems a faithful, and humbling, interpretation of this text to say that in order to have integrity as a church, the church, we must be practicing the ministry of reconciliation. Our public witness of grace freely given is made moot by family feuds; our public calls for peace in our neighborhoods are damaged by our violence and vitriol toward one

another; our public calls for unity are torn asunder by the unrelenting gossip mills and institutional schisms within our church communities.

Much of the church's bad reputation in the wider community can be traced back to unresolved conflict, a ministry of division and separation, which is an egregiously unfaithful witness; especially when we consider that we are called to a ministry of reconciliation.

The second 'internal' goal - a goal related to our relationships with one another and our interior lives - that our church council set last weekend is "cultivating true welcome and belonging." We can put up as many signs and make as many statements as we want to, and we do and will continue to do so, but if we don't open ourselves up to get to know new people among us, if we don't open our friend groups to new additions, if we start to think that we have learned all there is to know about one another, if we

don't continually assess for where we are lacking integrity, the house will fall.

But if we continually practice opening our hearts to one another, if we look for people sitting alone on a Sunday morning and invite them to sit with us, if we accompany people through their first times here, if we saw ourselves as connectors - making introductions to weave connections - if we celebrate one another's gifts especially when they are different from our own, if we rejoice at hearing one another's voices and becoming aware of one another's presence in this gathered community, if we cultivate a congregation of true belonging and welcome, we might become the righteousness, the integrity, of God. We might become the body of Christ that looks like the body of the risen Christ. We might become ambassadors for Christ, making God's appeal to the world in a compelling way. The life we live together might be truly beautiful enough for others to want to learn what Christ has to offer: a new creation.