

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.¹⁷ Therefore, ***if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.*** The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, ***in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.*** ²⁰ Therefore, ***we are ambassadors for Christ,*** God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

³² ***And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself***

Today's Epistle Lesson – the 5th chapter of 2 Corinthians – provides scriptural foundation for the mention I make here almost every Sunday – when I say that Saint Marks is an embassy, and each of us is an ambassador of the Kingdom of Heaven.

And – as an embassy – like the US embassy in Moscow – the ground inside the embassy is not the soil of the host country, but the soil of the Kingdom whose embassy represents it. We really are on holy ground. We sit and stand upon the ambassadorial soil of the Kingdom of Heaven when we gather here. And we are ambassadors of the Kingdom of Heaven within and without these walls – speaking and acting on behalf of God. We are ambassadors, and this is God's Embassy.

But, wait! Before we jump down to verse 20's appointment, let's back up to our confirmation hearing. Let's go back up to verse 17:

if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

In our study on Monday evenings, we use a video which lasts about 45 minutes – of Richard Rohr teaching in a small group setting. About half of the video is his instruction and the rest is the dialogue between him and the others in the circle on the video. Then we spend the other 45 minutes in our discussion of what was said.

This past Monday, one of the participants in the video made a provocative statement about 2 Corinthians 5:17, without mentioning the verse itself. That statement was: **Most people don't come to church to be transformed; they come to be confirmed. They don't want to be changed; they merely want the church experience to confirm all that they already believe.**

Really? Is this true? I thought about taking a straw vote this morning, asking how many people come to the embassy desiring to be transformed, or just to be confirmed. But, then, I decided not to ask for that show of hands.

I did remember an excerpt from one of the first ministry books I read (years before I went to seminary) by Eugene Peterson – the man who in recent years did a new translation of the Bible, that many in this church use – *The Message*. He wrote in the book *The Contemplative Pastor*:

As a pastor, I don't like being viewed as nice but insignificant. I bristle when a high-energy executive leaves the place of worship with the comment, "This was wonderful, Pastor, but now we have to get back to the real world, don't we?" I had thought we were in the most-real world, the world revealed as God's, a world believed to be invaded by God's grace and turning on the pivot of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.

The executive's comment brings me up short:

- **He isn't taking this seriously.**
- **Worshiping God is marginal to making money.**
- **Prayer is marginal to the bottom line.**
- **Christian salvation is a brand preference.**

I bristle and want to assert my importance. I want to force the recognition of the key position I hold in the economy of God and in the executive's economy if he only knew it.

The executive to whom Eugene Peterson is referring is someone who does not come to worship to be transformed – but merely to be confirmed. I'll finish that Peterson quote in a few moments.

To what are we to be transformed? What is the message of the newly created ambassador? The apostle Paul makes this very clear (in verse 19):

[I]n Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

So our message is one of the whole world being RECONCILED to God, but also God is **“not counting trespasses (sins) against them.”**

This is the meaning of what Jesus said about His death upon the cross, in John 12:32 – our memory verse for today. Would you say it together with me:

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself

To make sure that his meaning was not meant, John says in the very next verse:

³³ He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

When Jesus was hoisted up upon the cross of crucifixion, he not only was going through what was necessary for the conquering forever of death (i.e. the resurrection) but he was also drawing all things unto Himself. He was accomplishing the **PURPOSE OF GOD: THE RECONCILIATION OF THE WORLD.**

All of this is substantiated in (among several similar verses) Galatians 2:16

we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through THE FAITHFULNESS OF JESUS CHRIST.

This really is something new

This is the message of reconciliation we are to share

God did not send Christ in the world to change God's mind about humans. Rather the Good New News is that God sent Christ into the world to change our minds about God.

- We ARE acceptable.
- We are worthy.
- We are loved.
- Things like sin ARE NOT COUNTED.
- We are saved.
- God through Jesus has reconciled ALL THINGS unto God.

Mission accomplished. And all really does mean ALL.

That changes everything.

We are in a very rancorous, audacious political campaign – one which commentators from Fox News through CNN to MSNBC have all proclaimed as historically vitriolic. Never has the language been more divisive, the insults more inflammatory.

But this is not OUR language. As Ambassadors of the kingdom, ours is to be the language of reconciliation. God, through Christ Jesus is reconciling ALL – from Bernie Sanders to Ted Cruz -- ALL – unto God.

Ours is to be the language of reconciliation. God, through Christ Jesus is reconciling ALL – from the worst suicide bomber to the most docile rocking chair great, great, grandmother United Methodist in Boise, Idaho – unto God.

Is this the language we are using, as ambassadors of that Kingdom?

Or do we come to church, longing for God to confirm our own particular ideologies?

Make no mistake about it – we are ambassadors of God's Kingdom. And **IF** ours is not the language of reconciliation of all people through the faithfulness of Jesus, then we have not been made new. We are not where we need to be.

But, alas, I am not following the role of the pastor – as Eugene Peterson tells it. He sees the work of the pastor as being subversive. But, today, I have come out of the closet; I can no longer be subversive. To finish that quote:

I bristle and want to assert my importance. I want to force the recognition of the key position I hold in the economy of God and in the executive's economy if he only knew it.

Then I remember that I am a subversive. My long-term effectiveness depends on my not being recognized for who I really am. If he realized that I actually believe the American way of life is doomed to destruction, and that another kingdom is right now being formed in secret to take its place, he wouldn't be at all pleased. If he knew what I was really doing and the difference it was making, he would fire me.

Yes, I believe that. I believe that the kingdoms of this world, American and Venezuelan and Chinese, will become the kingdom of our God and Christ, and I believe this new kingdom is already among us. That is why I'm a pastor, to introduce people to the real world and train them to live in it.

I learned early that the methods of my work must correspond to the realities of the kingdom. The methods that make the kingdom of America or any human kingdom strong - economic, military, technological, informational - are not suited to making the kingdom of God strong. I have had to learn a new methodology: truth-telling and love-making, prayer and parable. These are not methods very well adapted to raising the standard of living in suburbia or massaging the ego into a fashionable shape.

But America and suburbia and the ego compose my parish. Most of the individuals in this amalgam suppose that the goals they have for themselves and the goals God has for them are the same. *It is the oldest religious mistake: refusing to countenance any real difference between God and us, imagining God to be a vaguely imagined extrapolation of our own desires, and then hiring a priest to manage the affairs between self and the extrapolation. And I, one of the priests they hired, am having none of it.*

But if I'm not willing to help them become what they want to be, what am I doing taking their pay? I am being subversive. I am undermining the kingdom of self and establishing the kingdom of God. I am helping them to become what God wants them to be, using the methods of subversion.

My sisters and brothers, we are ALL in need of transformation. None of us – is yet where we need to be, I suspect. And I know your pastor is not yet where he needs to be – but is still in need of being transformed, of becoming the new creation God intends him to be.

But God continues to work on us, in this amazing work of reconciliation. HOWEVER, we must desire to be made new.

And we have an absolute duty to better represent the Kingdom of Heaven in our daily living. **We need to face a very real reality – in today's world, the MAJORITY of people are not interested in being part of the church, because the message of reconciliation is NOT being conveyed. Instead people are hearing from OTHER CHURCHES a message of judgment and separation and divisiveness.**

Not so much from Saint Marks, I am very happy to say. But we need to make sure that more folks hear the message of reconciliation that we try to preach and teach and live.

It's not enough that we simply believe it. We have to be good ambassadors.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.