

In Christ

2 Corinthians 5: 14 – 21

The Reverend Heather Miner

July 26, 2009

Sometimes I wonder what all this religious language really means. Phrases like *God reconciling us to himself so we might have a ministry of reconciliation and become the righteousness of God* seem to talk of a glory that I don't usually encounter in day to day life, or even in day to day ministry, which isn't so different, really. Yet, what we know of Paul is that he didn't live apart from the world so that he might think such high thoughts. Instead Paul drew upon this language to describe the very difference it meant for him to live day to day "in Christ." For Paul, living in Christ is not about simply about appreciating the majesty of the mountains or the vastness of the ocean. It *is* about recognizing that the same majestic effort that went into the creation of our world is now at work in those who are "in Christ"--you and me. We are to be a force of God's nature.

The idea that we are such a force, I hope, is sobering. I shouldn't need to bring out the Total Depravity argument for us to recognize how vastly different is our nature from that of God's. It is true that we don't need to think of ourselves as only being sinners to realize that sin does take hold of us from time to time. No matter how we try to free ourselves from the tentacles of ungodly desire, we still feel it; we still get trapped in it. Even our best impulses to care for another can turn into a sickness, an unhealthy dependence to be needed. The list goes on and on. We may not be totally depraved, but we will always be in an earthly battle to remain aligned with God.

The check on "our power," we who would become the righteousness of God, is our need for--our dependence on--God in the first place. The opposite, making ourselves equal to God, is the biggest idolatry described in the Bible. It was self idolatry that led to the tower of Babel, Adam's eating the fruit of knowledge, and Israel not caring for their poor in the world of the prophets. It is a form of self

idolatry that leads us, today, to put all our pride in what we've built, or to think and act as if we know more than everyone else including God, or leads us, at times, to be unable to see beyond our own needs.

The question is...do we need God? Do you really need God? Do you need God in this life?

It is your question to answer. I'll warn you that the rest of Paul's argument only makes sense if the answer is "yes." And, not a small "yes, I would like God to be part of my life," but a capital "YES, my **biggest** need is for God to be part of my life."

Before we move ahead, let me give you another way to think about it...do you, do we, does our world, need an actively creative force, outside of ourselves, of reconciliation?

In the word *reconciliation* we Christians have another big theological idea that a dictionary cannot adequately explain. When Paul talks about reconciliation, it isn't simply about bringing into alignment a few statements or numbers, but it is about bringing the world together into a unity, a wholeness that reflects, yet transcends, the beauty of each of its members.

In my view it is an impossible dream without God's creative reconciling force.

In my early twenties I worked as a volunteer in Maryland, near DC, and spent much time trying to assist those in need. One day I went with a homeless woman to speak to someone in authority about the needs of the homeless. I remember an elevator, an office, sitting down with a man in a suit. It felt surreal then and even more now. The homeless woman began to talk. To my surprise, she told the man about how the other homeless women were all addicts, and drunks, and just plain lazy--and didn't deserve any more help. I remember, I hope I didn't imagine it, a knowing in the man's eye...that he understood what was happening.

I've reflected on this scene for many years. In that moment, when the woman was to speak on behalf of her fellow sisters who also lived on the street, something else took over. She didn't want to be one of them. She put all of her

efforts into creating for us, the “helper” and the “authority,” a way that we might see her as being different. The irony is, just by sitting there in the office, both of us leaning forward to listen, we were inviting her to be ... to simply be. Yet the only beauty she could see in herself was in contrast to the worst of what she saw around her.

There we had come with the intention of changing a small thing in our world and instead the world showed how strong is its influence on a human heart.

And, looking back on it now, older, having spent much more time in prayer, I wonder. What if, instead of being programmed to be there to talk at the authority about just one more cause, I had learned his name and ways and we had come together to seek a way to help. When we heard the woman criticize all others, what if we had stopped, and prayed together in whatever prayer language we could share, for God’s love to push out some of the demons, for God’s love to fill her. What if, we had lived, not simply according to our various roles, but out of our need and dependence and trust in God?

I believe that if God had been invited in, something new would have formed...whether it was a woman who recognized herself as something more than one in need or a man who was able to be, not just a suit, but one who could act as God’s hand; or a young woman finding in herself courage to speak a prayer.

When our first need is for God to be with us, all of us, we give God an opportunity to create a new possibility that will set us free. The work of reconciliation is God’s. God creates in us unity with his will, his way, his creation. But we have a part to play too...

As it did for Paul, the love of Christ urges us on.

Over the years I’ve had many occasions to encounter those who have been urged on into moments, ministries of reconciliation, by the love of Christ. Let me warn you, these aren’t the big stories of life change. For the longer I minister, the more God seems to tell me that, big things are good, but small things are the daily manna God seeks us to give another, and in so doing, to give us our daily bread.

One story is about a woman named Marilyn. A single woman in her 40s, she was taking care of elderly parents. Her mom was in the hospital. She had finished visiting and was leaving for the night when she heard someone call for her attention in another room. It turned out to be someone who had attended church who knew Marilyn's face, probably because every week Marilyn was one of the 4 that came down the aisle to collect the offering. As they talked, Marilyn realized that she had been mistaken for the pastor's wife. Rather than excusing herself quickly, she remained in the room and the woman asked her to pray for her.

Marilyn, though shy about praying out loud, answered God's call on her in that moment. She prayed. The woman, with tears in her eyes, thanked her. When Marilyn talked about it afterwards, it was with great disbelief and joy that God would use her in that way.

Another is a man named Don, who was a greeter for church. Don had many struggles of his own. Even as he was becoming more and more weak with his own battle against disease and could no longer stand outside, he found himself a stool so he could sit at the door, with a big smile, welcoming all to church. His choice to do a simple task with joy and enthusiasm touched countless lives.

And then, I recently heard about how a woman here has been called upon to bring another, who cannot drive, to church. Rather than seeing it as a duty or job, she sees it as God's call upon her to be involved every week.

The love of Christ urges us on.

The word behind "urges" has a spectrum of meaning: from "constrain" to "push outward". We are not constrained by rules. Rather the constraint comes from love, from being loved, from knowing we aren't the only ones Christ loves, not the only ones Christ died for. I'm sure Marilyn was ready to go home after being with her Mom, but she was constrained and pushed out by the love of Christ to enter into the room. I don't think Don even questioned any more, he knew where he belonged on Sundays. He was constrained and pushed by the love of Christ to welcome all into church. And, while many things might get in the way of coming

to church weekly, my friend is constrained by the love of Christ to serve another and to be here where God continues to push her forward in faith.

When I think of God's reconciliation, I think of these moments of God pushing someone forward to create a relationship not bound by family but bound to Christ's love for all. To me it is as beautiful as a view from the top of a mountain to watch someone, who by the world's accounts should be at home dying, choosing to live and bringing joy to each one he meets. It is a love as vast as the ocean that allows us to enter into places we would not go unless propelled there by a force of creation. And, by extension, and very much of Paul, it is a love that pushes us to be in relationship with those who are very different from us.

"Jesus died for all" Paul shouts from the page "so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."

Therefore "From now on...we regard no one from a human point of view..."

We once knew Christ from a human point of view, but now we understand, in him, is God. Through Christ, God brought his reconciliation.

And, we who live in Christ, are human with human failings and flaws. Unlike Jesus, there is no perfectly obedient man or woman in this church. Yet, I'd venture to say that there is no perfectly disobedient man or woman in this church either. The part of us that is ready to obey is the part of us God is already using to reconcile all to himself.

The phrase "we regard no one from a human point of view" suggests to me we seek out those places in each other where God is moving and living and acting. We take notice. We allow ourselves to experience wonder at what God is doing through another.

This is easiest when the way a person responds to God's movement in them aligns with our experience. But Paul was not about creating communities of people who all thought the same thing. We know that culture wars in his churches had to do with what they could or could not eat, their understanding of scriptures, the need for circumcision. People, even then, interpreted scripture differently, according

to their understanding of how God was speaking to them and acting through them at the time. The divisions it created in the church made Paul cry.

How quickly the mountaintop crumbles when we seek not to find what is holy in one another, but to focus on our disagreements. How the ocean of the Holy Spirit can quickly shrink into a desert lakebed. How a church can suddenly find herself divided, rather than united in Christ.

It is very human to force each other to take a stand, to see people as the positions they take, to plug people into their roles as we did that day in my life, some 20 years ago, when the “helper” and the “helped” met with the authority.

See one another, not from a human point of view, but from the view “in Christ,” as one God reconciled to himself. Look for that space in the other’s heart which allows God to move freely. Then we can become one. Then we are ready to become the force of God’s nature, God’s righteousness. It is in the seeking of that which is right and of God in one another and allowing what is holy to have full voice that can change what is wrong, even open the way to oust the demons which infect a soul. When we seek out God in another we seek to harness the creative force of God.

God’s reconciling force created out of the chaos of the cosmos the wonder of our earth; out of the tumult of the volcanic seas, the natural world; and out of the mud of humanity, those who would be like Christ: those through whom God will bring the world together into a unity, a wholeness of transforming beauty.