

Sermon: Agents of reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

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Intro

We live here in Egypt in days of darkness and tension. All people suffer from bad leaders, but the church suffers most. How do we deal with people who intend to do bad to us?

This question is actually relevant to all people at all times and in all places. We come across bullies and unkind people everywhere. Sometimes in our families, every now and then in the work place. We meet them in church, and we see them in society. We are sometimes the bullies ourselves.

How do we respond when people attack churches and the police stay away? Or when they even seem to help those who attack our brothers and sisters?

A major danger is that we begin to see the world in two groups: us, the good people, of course, versus them, the bad guys. And that we allow our hearts to become cold and hateful in response to the hatred and the contempt of those others.

Tension with people

St Paul had to deal with church leaders in the city of Corinth who looked down on him, their very founding father. There were 'mighty leaders' in the church in Corinth who spoke more eloquently than Paul, who looked more impressive, who seemed more spiritual.

And they spoke against Paul now, trying to rule over the church that Paul had started and they tried to close the door for Paul. 'You are no longer welcome, we do not like you... You are not a real servant of God.'

How to respond when people do bad things to us? I am sure we all had experiences like this in the past weeks. We people can be so unkind to each other! What do you do when people treat you badly?

Paul wrote his letter to the church in Corinth to try to change the mind of his critics; in 2 Cor 5:12 he says, let me read it:

We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.

Paul had to face people whose pride was in outward appearance and not in what is in the heart. What does he mean with this? That external things are not important and that in religion only inner things matter? I do not think so.

Paul's opponents boasted in form or outward appearance, not in matters of substance. This was a typical complaint in those days about certain schools of philosophy: they were all show of words and no substance.

And Paul then explains in the next verse what he means with substance, with the heart: He says:

For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us... (2 Cor 5:13-14a)

Whatever we do, however we feel, whatever we experience, all the time, wherever we are, we live for God and for you. That is what Paul says. A Christian lifestyle means: living for God and living for other people. This is the summary of the will of God, of the law: Love God totally, and love others as you love yourself. That is the heart. That is substance. Much more important than looking strong or speaking beautifully.

We do this, because the love that Christ showed for us, controls us. We have met Jesus Christ and his love for us, and this is so overwhelming that we are in its grip. Because he so much loved us, we live for God and for other people. Like Jesus Christ.

In the story of the Prodigal Son we get a good view of how great God's love for us is; with open arms He is awaiting us. He loves good people and bad people. He shows great love, even for a bad son who returns home. What an immense pool of love.

God reconciled us to himself

Paul gives us some beautiful insights in his view of this love of God.

Vs 18: 'God reconciled us to himself through Christ.'

Vs 19: 'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.'

The whole movement of God's love and reconciliation is from God to humankind. God embraced mankind; He took the initiative. Where mankind messed up and behaved as God's enemy,

God himself repaired the relationship. Where mankind threw stones, shouted foul language, shot teargas at God, He stood there with arms wide open.

Humankind sinned, God forgave. Men rebelled, God reconciled. People were bad, God showed utter goodness.

The fact that God reconciled himself with the world, means that he was the aggrieved party, we were the criminals.

In order to bring fighting people together, often a third party, a mediator is needed, but in the case of God, he took the initiative and he himself sent the mediator – his own Son Jesus Christ. But humankind even killed the mediator!

Justice had to be done and mankind deserved punishment, eternal punishment, for fighting the loving and eternal God. But God himself provided a perfect and eternally worthy substitute. His own Son died for our sins.

There was a glorious exchange: He took our sins, and died for them; and the goodness and perfection, the righteousness of Jesus Christ was counted as our righteousness - and we live by it. This is the faith of the church! Read 2 Cor 5:21:

God made him who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

The key-word is 'in Him'. If by faith we are attached to Him, all benefits of Jesus our Lord are also ours. This idea of being 'in Christ' is very important in the theology of St Paul. He uses it again and again. In Ephesians 1:13 he says:

You were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation... having believed you were marked in Him.

Strange expression actually, what does in Christ mean?

Maybe we should think of a ship on the sea. If we are in the ship, anything that happens to the ship, happens to us. The ship is our protection against the waves, against drowning, against the storm.

We are in Jesus – in the ship that brings us to safe harbour.

By being in Him, forgiveness of sins and perfect righteousness are put into our account, so that our relationship with God is fully restored.

It is all Gods plan, Gods action, Gods gift, Gods initiative, Gods love.

Be a peacemaker

Not only has God reconciled us to himself, but He also gave the church a ministry of reconciliation.

He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. He made us his ambassadors for making peace.

When the Romans armies, in the time of Paul, had conquered a land, they would send an ambassador to that defeated nation, to negotiate peace. That is the function of the apostle Paul; that is what the church does. This is what should be reflected in our personal lives. On behalf of God, we offer peace.

This means, in the first place, that in whatever circumstances we are as a church, we should never shrink away from the task of Christian proclamation, and we should not be intimidated by to-days religious pluralism in our western world.

How could we escape from this beautiful task if we are children of God our Father? The ministry of reconciliation is founded on the fact that we are send by the king himself. And it is founded in the character of God himself.

We are to offer people the peace-treaty of God. All is prepared for peace, by God himself. Just sign it. Have faith, and you fall into the loving arms of God the Father!

But do not forget the reason why Paul wrote this. He wrote this in the context of his efforts to restore the relationship with the church in Corinth. It is in the first place because he want reconciliation with his critics.

The reason why he writes this, is because we are called to pattern our lives after God and Jesus Christ. He writes in 2 Cor 5:15:

He died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

We are to live for Him. And for each other. Just as God took the initiative to reconcile us, useless sinners, to Him, we are called to behave likewise.

How do we behave toward people who are less than kind, who make our life miserable? Just as God did to us. Offer peace. Offer your hand.

St Paul writes: 'From now on we do regard no one from a worldly point of view.' (2 Cor 5:16) We see people as God sees them. We see people as the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son waits for his son to return. We see people as lost sheep, made for communion with God and with each other, but having gone astray.

Jesus Christ died for those wicked people who do more harm than good. God the Father loves them. So let our heart not be filled with anger and hatred for those who do evil to us.

Do not write people off. Just as Paul did not write his enemies in the church in Corinth off, we are to have open arms for all people, and even go

out to them and show them that as far as we are concerned, we like to live in peace and love with all people.

No. That will often not work out. I do not want to make it sound cheap... When we offer our hand to those who we have fights with, they may chop it off. As happened to Jesus.

Offering people peace is a costly affair, because it hurts to step over our own boundaries of resistance against people who are not good to us. And they may laugh in our face. They make look us ridiculous. The peacemaking mission of Jesus even ended in people calling for his crucifixion.

But as this is the pattern of the heart of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, what else can we do, than always go an extra mile, always take that extra step, and be a peacemaker.

This means we may have to more often zip our lips than we are used to. We may not take our verbal revenge on those who make our lives hard.

Conclusion

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called Sons of God”, Jesus said.

Blessed, because they pattern their lives after the Son of God.

Blessed, because by this behaviour we show very clearly that we are in Christ, and that our lives are shaped by the God we are part of.

So let us guard our hearts, and our mouth, that we do not adopt the pattern of behaviour of those who stand up against our faith.

Let God and his ways be ever before us - the way of the open arms and the outstretched hand, not only to our friends but even to those who are not our friends. Yes, tough. but it is the way of God.