

The Son of Light

II Corinthians 5:16-21

I want to thank Steve Mead and Alan Harder, who have filled this pulpit in recent weeks. I appreciate their perspectives on the Word of God, and it gives me a sense of relief that I can call on them when I am away. On New Year's Eve, Linda and I watched Steve preach from the comfort of our couch, at home. Last week she and I tried watching Alan while waiting at an airport gate in Washington, D.C. But it was too noisy to really hear him. So I watched in my office on Tuesday. I honestly give thanks for their thoughtful, sincere preaching. I Praise God for their faith—as I did for Scott Paul-Bonham's when he still inhabited this zip code.

Speaking of airports, I want to share the story of something I observed in Tampa. Linda and I arrived there a bit early, because of an issue that concerned us. But it got resolved immediately, so we had time to eat the lunch we had carried in with us. We sat at a high table in the main entrance hall. It had three seats; we occupied two, while an employee of the Transportation Security Administration—the TSA—sat in the third. I guess most of us think of the TSA as a necessary, if annoying, thing. Kind of like hall monitors at school. We go through security obediently, because we have to, and we want to get on with it with as little hassle as possible. We know it's for a good cause, but it means additional time and stress at a time when we'd prefer not to have to deal with it. But this TSA guy, in uniform, in front of God and everybody, was

on the phone with his three year-old son. On speaker and on video. And they were singing the Itsy-Bitsy Spider. Over and over again. With all the hand motions.

It was so, stinkin' cute. He had gray at his temples, so I would assume he had this child a bit later in life. He and I made eye contact midway through it. I gave him the thumbs up and he smiled. He could not have cared less about the public situation. It made me think about watching Linda earlier that week pretending our grandchildren's stuffie animals had broken limbs that needed casts. We will indulge our children and grandchildren in ways that might otherwise embarrass us. When we belong to each other we no longer care about how it looks—we just do whatever it takes to make each other happy, whole. Our passage today from II Corinthians tells us that Jesus condescended to our level in order to achieve reconciliation. The distance between us and him is far greater than that between a grandmother and grandchildren. We are less than stuffies to God. Yet God, out of love, has lowered God's self to our level. In order to maintain our relationship with God. Praise God!

The Apostle Paul wrote the words we read today. In the previous verse he said, “And (Jesus) died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” We speak of lowering ourselves, of condescending. There can be no deeper lowering than death. Jesus died. For us. “Therefore,” Paul writes, “if any one is in Christ, that one is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” Let us take closer look at the concept of being “in Christ.” Being in Christ means living in profound connection with Him, having

a relationship with Jesus. But what does that mean?

As I pondered this question it occurred to me that it might work better to describe the lives of people I have known who without question are “in Christ”. I think of the light in the eyes of Linda's and my friend, Lee. He and his wife live in Iowa. She is an elder in their Presbyterian Church. He has been. He sang at our wedding. He has a look in his eyes, a presence that speaks—without him ever needing to use words—of his genuine faith in Jesus Christ as his Lord and savior. I think of the first pastor I ever worked for, Jim. In my immaturity I had all sorts of issues with him, but I never—not for one second—questioned his relationship with Jesus. There are people in this congregation, and as a matter of fact, in my own home, who meet this standard of being “in Christ”.

Paul digs deeper. Those in Christ are a “new creation”. Through the reconciliation Jesus accomplished, when we believe in him, we get recreated. We become new, different, beings. This might seem too good to be true. Most of us probably do not feel any better, any more holy. Yet that is not the promise. We are promised that—in Christ—we are reconciled. Our relationship with God is renewed. So let us look at two terms: reconciliation and renewal. Reconciliation means the healing of a broken relationship. A husband and wife, let's call them Jack and Jill, suffered a major break in their relationship when she had an extra-marital affair. He walked into the indiscretion, and in the heat of the moment confessed later to wanting to kill them both. After they all cooled down they decided to see their pastor. Who had

absolutely no idea what to say or do. Fortunately, he had been trained to keep his mouth shut and listen. Eventually, Jack and Jill expressed the desire to save their marriage. And the Holy Spirit led the pastor to use biblical passages about reconciliation to address their situation. Including this one.

This pastor has seen the power of reconciliation at work. I have seen it in my own life and in the lives of others. Christ does not count our trespasses against us. Christ has every right to do so, but does not. In him, we become the “righteousness of God.” We sang the hymn, Lord I Need You on our last Sunday in my previous church. That was no accident. Because Lord, we need you. We trespass. We sin. For years I had an issue with the lyrics of that song. They speak of, “my one defense, my righteousness, O God, how I need you.” I always thought, “Hang on, my righteousness”?!? I know darned well how unrighteous I am! Then I came to realize that the song refers not to *my* righteousness but to Christ's. He has become our righteousness, our hope. That Sunday, after twenty-one years of pastoring that church, with all the mistakes I made and the problems I caused, I sat behind my drum and sang that song with my whole heart. And the tears flowed down my cheeks. Because I understood how dependent on God everything I do is. You too.

And renewal. The restoration, the regrowth, the adding more time to our subscription. Because Jesus died for our sins, we have new life. We have another shot at it all. Let us return to Jack and Jill. Because they reconciled, they gave their life together a new chance. They are still together; they have two children and three

grandchildren. They have fostered dogs, doing the hard, emotional work of giving a temporary home to animals, then letting them go when they find a permanent placement. I cannot imagine doing that. They have also become the backbone of a community ministry to the homeless.

If you were to ask Jack and Jill whether they see themselves as good examples, they would probably both recoil in horror. She remembers her infidelity, he remembers his enraged reaction to it. Yet they *are* exemplars, illustrations of how God uses imperfect people like us to further the workings of God's will in this imperfect world. As Paul wrote, "we are ambassadors for Christ, God making God's appeal through us." I often say that very few people know where the Central Presbyterian Church is. We know, and we think others do, too. But they do not. According to the National Transportation and Safety Board, 7th St. is only the 107th-most traveled roadway in the Terre Haute region. That is, not very many people drive past us. I can tell you anecdotally that when I say "church row" most people have no idea what I'm talking about. *Unless we tell people they will not know.*

Tell people. Invite them. Ask them to check out our video worship ministry first, if that feels more comfortable. Recently, a person who attends here but does not belong, was asked by an acquaintance if they went to a church. They spoke of this church and invited the people asking them to try it out for themselves. God knows how this will end, but those folks have come to worship here. *That's how it works.* You can go online and get reviews for restaurants and movies and whatever. If

enough people have rated these places, those can be useful recommendations. But nothing tops the opinion of somebody you know personally. When a trusted friend tells me the Chinese at such-and-such a place is great, it carries extra weight. I am much more likely to spend my money there.

We have been entrusted with the message of reconciliation. We have the Good News that in Christ, God has forgiven our sins and welcomes us into the fellowship of the church. Praise God! Why do we hesitate to share this news? Why do we not invite people to join us? Is it politeness? Insecurity in our faith? We need not be overbearing or insensitive. We can think our way through this. We can find ways to invite people to check us out that do not put them—or us—in an uncomfortable spot. Be an ambassador for Christ. You need not act holy, certainly not holier than them. You need act only as a person who has experienced the joy of reconciliation, and who wishes to extend the opportunity for the same to others.

This is a healthy, active church. Becoming a part of it would bless anybody. The only thing standing between that and more people is our own reluctance to extend the invitation. In Christ, we are reconciled to God. Ask others to experience the joy. Invite them to our church.