

Yes, You
II Corinthians 5:11-20
for Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC
15 October 2023

Our text today comes from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, chapter 5, verses 11-20. Listen for the word:

¹¹Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. ¹²We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. ¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶From 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 know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Back in the days when you'd answer your door rather than running for cover at the horror of an unexpected guest, my family started getting regular visits from two poised young men in crisp white shirts and black pants. Once a quarter they'd ride up Shadowpine Road and park their bikes in our driveway. Occasionally my dad would invite them in, pulling out our family bible or some arcane work on American history and engaging in a lively discussion about the tenets of Mormonism, the history of the Presbyterian Church, and Joseph Smith.

We'd just returned from a trip out West, which included a stop at Temple Square. I'd been impressed at pristine Salt Lake, and I remained impressed at the patience of the young Mormons sitting in my kitchen. They were well prepared, sleek, and responsive. They were unshakable in their zeal, and, most importantly, they kept coming back.

I didn't think much about missionaries, which of course is who the young men were, until about a decade later when, by some happenstance, I found myself at a wedding in a fundamentalist Christian church. When we were leaving the sanctuary I noticed a sign above the door:

"You are entering the battlefield."

I was struck by the brazenness of the signage. Never in my neighborhood Presbyterian Church had I been taught to consider the world a battlefield, a cosmic place of war where God was tusslin' with the Devil for the hearts of young humanity.

Startled, I struck up a conversation with a member of the church who ensured me that we were, indeed, actively engaged in spiritual warfare, and that even in that moment Satan was vying for control over my eternal destiny.

He continued, telling me about one of the church's most important ministries. Young men left the church to evangelize in the community, serving as missionaries in their own backyards. They carried picket signs and leaflets, ready to explain to each passerby that they were unknowingly on a highway to hell (I stole a few of those tracts, perhaps sealing my fate). He explained the entire enterprise in stark terms: the fall (fundamentalists never do start with the goodness of creation, do they?), sin, the cross, and the choice. He turned to me with a wink: *have you found Jesus?*

Unaware that Jesus was lost, and having been raised in a mild PC(USA) congregation full of kind-hearted teachers and nurses, it never much occurred to me that the world was a battlefield or that Christians were called to actively engage in an evangelistic mission. Between the image of the sleek, persistent LDS brothers and the militant picketers, the entire enterprise seemed rather unbecoming.

Well, the past is never past, and the congregation of the Church in Corinth, to whom today's letter is addressed, found themselves in a situation similar to my own. The folks in Corinth thought Paul's zeal for Christ was a bit unsavory — he appeared "beside himself," the text says, as if straight out of the mouth of my mother. Since Paul left Corinth new evangelists had risen up. The new guys were far more polished than Paul. Their arguments weren't as esoteric, their presence was less explosive, and they seemed, on the whole, a more attractive option than the Apostle.

Faced with rejection and suspicion, Paul found himself justifying both his evangelism and his appearance. He wanted to explain to the Corinthians precisely why he spoke with such passion, what message drove him to risk his own life, and why that message was far greater than the sly ephemera of the city's evangelists.

Paul admits that he's pretty well lost his mind. He's ecstatic, vibrating, wild for this good news, in love with the city and unwilling to participate in the silencing of the news of God-in-Christ. He won't dress it up to make it more palatable. He has a word, and he thinks it's worth telling, no matter the personal cost — no matter how foolish it may seem.

Now that's all well and good. We know Paul got his vindication. His legacy looms over Christendom like it did over Corinth.

The problem for the Corinthians is that Paul is not *only* writing to justify his ministry. He has a task for the young Christian community, tied to his understanding of what Christ's death and

resurrection means for the world. He wants the Corinthians to become wild evangelists in their own time and place too. For Paul, hearing the news and spreading it are two sides of the same coin. Something in the Gospel is propulsive. It demands a retweet.

For Paul, hearing the good news is not neutral. It is kenotic.

Today we are continuing our *Back to the Basics* sermon series. You may have already figured out the question for the morning: *what do Presbyterians believe about Evangelism*. Here's it is in a nutshell, a neat package for us to debate over lunch: what does Paul's wild news, his kenotic message, mean for us...for well-meaning, foolishness-averse, decent-and-in-order Presbyterians in Greenville, SC?

Back, for a moment, to my childhood. It turns out I wasn't the only well-intentioned Presbyterian uncomfortable with evangelism. Between my family and our church, no one was particularly interested in talking to other folks about Jesus.

Sure, we'd gather on Sundays and Wednesdays to proclaim the word to each other and we'd engage in kitchen table conversations about scripture (after all our faith was of primary importance to us) — but you'd never catch us taking a bike ride to knock on doors or raising picket signs in parking lots.

Rather than unbecoming speech, we preferred *lived* Christianity. Both as a church and a family, we found it right to locate our witness in our public lives. So we advocated for political policies in line with our faith — those that expanded the dignity of individuals rather than limiting them. We practiced acts of charity. We went out to learn about the expansiveness of God's creation.

We did our best to live the Christian life.

In the heart of a culture that was clanging with talk about "God" — hateful talk that seemed opposed to who we knew God to be — we took comfort in a (likely misattributed) saying of St. Francis: I bet half of y'all know it too: *Preach the gospel always, when necessary use words*.

Talk is cheap, actions speak louder than words, better to remain silent and appear a fool than to speak and remove all doubt. Why talk — why risk alienating and offending, looking utterly idiotic, and aligning ourselves with all those folks who preached hate — when our witness could be in our living?!

Now I want you to hear me loud and clear:
any faith that professes Jesus is Lord
but does not live by that profession is,
as James rightly says,
"worthless."

Those of us who hear must also do.

But Paul reminds us that those who hear are also tasked with speaking. How else, after all, can we come to understand the radical, universal message Paul proclaims in verse 15: **"And he died**

for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for the one who for their sake died and was raised.” That’s not a message we can intuit from a stunning sunrise, or catch knee deep in a rushing river; it’s not something we sense peak of the Lookout Trail.

The news of Jesus Christ, the news that made Paul nutty — that in Christ we (**all** of us — the *κόσμον*, Paul says) have died *yet are alive with and for Christ* — is not readily available to our senses.

That’s the kind of gospel we have to be told. That’s the good news we have to tell each other within these walls, at our kitchen tables, and, like it or not, out in the world.

Like the Corinthians, we who have heard the news, we who have seen God’s reconciliation and know ourselves to be grafted onto the new creation, are the ones God entrusts with telling the story to everybody else.

That’s the precise language Paul uses in verse 19. God has “entrusted” us with the message, making the divine appeal through us. God, Paul writes, has made us “ambassadors” of the gospel. The Greek word translated “ambassadors” (*πρεσβεύομεν ...*, which sounds an awful lot like Presbyterian by the way) can also be translated “representatives.” Both apply. We are ambassadors of reconciliation, called to represent God in our lives *and* to tell the story every chance we get.

We tell the story of reconciliation in contrast to the messages of sleek and clanging prophets who extol the wrath of a vengeful God, and who limit the mercy of the one who created us from love and imprinted us with divinity.

It sounds daunting, I know.

And you may not feel like you have adequate language.

But Paul lays that out for us too. Because the work is done, we don’t need to worry about “saving souls.” That was never our work. We need only to speak the truth of our lives:

- God has drawn near.
- The one from whom we were estranged does not count our sin against us.
- In Christ we die to every way of life that keeps us distracted from the world and separates us from one another and from God.
- Through his resurrection we live, and we who are alive are at every moment being made new, connected in a million ways to each other, to creation, and to God-in-Christ.

That sounds abstract, I know. So take a moment. Plum your theological imaginations. What would it mean, when given the opportunity, to proclaim the gospel in the context of your life... to tell

- how Westminster has changed your living,
- or precisely what faith in the Resurrected Christ has meant to you and your family,
- or how you went to Alabama with your church to learn about Civil Rights and returned transformed, ready to get in good, necessary trouble for our neighbors,
- or how your circle at Westminster shepherded you through grief,

- or how, when you worried that you were alienated and alone, by the sheer grace of God you found here a place of welcome for you and your spouse...

I'll tell you what...if you go saying all that you may — no, you will — sound like a fool.

But that foolishness is precisely what God calls us to. The witness of thousands of years of discipleship is a witness of foolishness — of everyday, ordinary folks *speaking the good news and living it*, even, perhaps especially, when that good news ran contrary to the values and vision of the world.

After all, in his earthly life Jesus lugged along a faithful cadre of nitwits. At every turn the disciples got it wrong. And Lord knows Paul wasn't the easiest sell. Paul was kicked out of just about every city he set foot in. He was complicated, rash, and brilliant. Like the rest of the apostles, he was, on one or two things (women in church, marriage, sexuality, and slavery), wrong. But he walked the walk, and God's faithfulness, God's good news, preserved despite his shortcomings.

Paul heard the message. It struck him blind and foolish. And when his eyes were pried open he saw a whole new world laid out where once had been a ho-hum place of adversity. All he could do was talk about it. Flawed. Faithful. Foolish.

God's ambassadors, God's representatives, God's Presbyterians in the world are sent not because of our brilliance, not because we get it all right, but because we have seen it! We have received the gift, been beneficiaries of God's reconciliation. That alone qualifies us to tell the story. Flawed. Faithful. Foolish.

One of the privileges of my work is that I am invited to be present in your lives. And I have seen you live the gospel in service to one another. You give of your time, your money, yourselves. You're preaching with your lives, y'all.

What I want you to remember is that the Good News must also be spoken. That's what we Presbyterians believe about evangelism. God, in some foolish wisdom, has entrusted *us* — yes even you — with the message of reconciliation. Not with picket signs, not by surprise drop-ins, but in the quotidian everyday, where newness is on the horizon waiting to be shown, where real flesh and blood people yearn to be told that they are known, they are loved, and they are a part of the newness of the kingdom of God.

In every corner the world spreads its message, a message that trades on fear and quid pro quo:
buy this to look younger,
take this to lose weight,
follow this to get rich,
keep what is yours, it's hard earned,
resources are scarce and only a few are chosen —

It is left to us to tell the truth.
God has drawn near, not for a chosen few, but for us all.

And God's reconciliation is an unlimited resource.

We who are alive in Christ no longer live for ourselves, but for the Lord who served the poor, the marginalized, and other everyday nitwits just like us. For them, for us, God has come down. We die in his death and are raised with new life in his resurrection.

So preach it. Don't be afraid of the foolishness. That's the point.

God has chosen you, deemed you worthy of this world-transforming message. Become what God has made you to be, a new creation, an ambassador, a Presbyterian representative speaking good news to a weary world.

We are a new creation. We, all of us, are chosen, loved, called by God.

It's a story that is itching to be told.
Are you willing to bear witness to it?