

June 24, 2018, Fifth after Pentecost
Farewell sermon
2 Corinthians 5:14-21
The Ministry Remains Open
Rev. George Ferch

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

Over the years I tried to give each sermon text a unique theme. The theme is meant to capture the main point the Spirit is making with that particular Word of God. Someone suggested this theme for today, in keeping with the occasion, "The old has passed away. The new has come."

I decided not to use the suggestion for two reasons. I'm not really comfortable with the implication of the first part. And, the Spirit is not writing about George Ferch retiring and Seth Bode beginning his work at Bethlehem.

The Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul's mind, and moved his pen to write about "the ministry of reconciliation." I want you to think of ministry as the work we do together but also as the place from which we do the work; think of a country's Ministry of Education, or, Ministry of Agriculture, for examples. Another word for ministry in that sense could be an embassy with an ambassador.

Some things change. Others things remain the same. What has not changed for Bethlehem and the surrounding communities, and, God willing, will not change is this: **The Ministry Remains Open.** God in Christ reconciling the world to himself is still the message; Ambassadors for Christ are still the messengers.

Any ministry or embassy must remain consistent and honest in its purpose. Its purpose is the message it has to share with those around it. Our message is reconciliation; the ending of enmity and division between us sinners and the holy God. "That is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them."

The apostle goes on to explain that reconciliation in detail in what we have come to call the Great Exchange. "God made him who did not sin, to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him." God laid my sins and guilt on Jesus on his cross. God credited his Son Jesus' holiness under the law and innocent sacrifice as my own.

This message is why we exist. It is the message that changed us. "So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a creation. The old has passed away. The new has come." This is the message that enables us and those with whom we share this message of reconciliation to overcome Satan, the unbelieving world, and our own sinful flesh. We carry out the ministry of reconciliation through the Word of God which remains forever even as all else passes away.

The Ministry remains open. It is not abandoned or overrun. If you saw the film, Rules of Engagement, you know it was about the ambassador and his staff abandoning the US Embassy when it came under attack. Some of us remember that dark day in 1979 when the Iranians took captive workers at the American Embassy in Tehran.

God's message of the world's reconciliation to himself in Christ, and the ministry of reconciliation he has entrusted to us are the all-powerful Word of God. That Word has made us new creations; saints through Christ and the children of God. We are not helpless only able to be taken captive by our former sinful desires. We are not ready to flee our ministry at the first sign of trouble. The ministry remains open because the ministry is Jesus Christ and "the gates of hell will not overpower it." [Mt. 16:18]

The apostle Paul had written to the Corinthians in his first letter, "For I had no intention of knowing anything among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." [2:2] This was my intention when I began my ministry and when I accepted Bethlehem's call. I know it is Pastor Bode's intention as well. It must remain your intention also as ambassadors in the ministry of reconciliation. This is not our ministry nor is it yours. It is Christ's ministry. The Ambassadors for Christ are still the messengers.

An ambassador is the spokesperson for the government. He or she cannot speak their own words but only the message from the country who has appointed them. They dedicate their lives to government service. We "no longer live for ourselves but for him who died in their place and was raised again." This love of Christ "compels us."

As ambassadors for Christ, we do not speak our own thoughts or words but only God's. We do not live our old lives that have passed away but new lives of faith and love. We live by inner compulsion not external obligation.

Paul was talking mainly about the apostles as ambassadors for Christ. His words certainly apply to all Christians. You are “ambassadors for Christ.” The ministry remains open and fully staffed. As ambassadors for Christ “we regard no one according to the flesh.”

Ambassadors for Christ do not look on anyone from a worldly point of view. We do not care about their race, social standing, wealth or poverty, or previous way of life. We look on them as fellow redeemed who must know the good news of that completed and complete reconciliation. We go to them in love and in the power of the gospel invitation, “We urge you, on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”

Nor do we like Paul “know Christ according to the flesh.” Prior to conversion Paul looked at Jesus from a worldly point of view; a prophet, just a man, a failed leader who followers deserved only imprisonment and death. The apostle added, “We no longer look at him that way.” Now Paul saw Jesus as his Savior. Paul knew Jesus as true God risen from the dead who had called him to be apostle to the Gentiles, an ambassador for Christ. We know Christ who has called us to be his ambassadors.

We speak for Christ because we know who Christ really is, the world’s reconciliation. We speak to our neighbors because we know that Christ reconciled them to God on the cross. This place is our Ministry, or Embassy, of reconciliation from which we go and speak God’s message. The ministry remains open for the message of reconciliation and for all ambassadors who share it.

WH Auden wrote the line in a poem, “Let all your thanks be thanks.” When I think of the past years in ministry I thank God for his grace to call me into this work I hope to continue in different ways. I thank God for the privilege of having been called to serve you.” Amen. <SDG>