

# Reconciling the World!

Isaiah 42:1-9, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21

November 8, 1998

“If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” Here is the good news: Jesus Christ has made us new. We have needed this for a long time. Of course, from the beginning of our lives, we have known certain kinds of growth, learning, advances, and improvements. Perhaps we have learned how to read, to think, to interact with other people, to sing, or even to love. For all of these we are more grateful than we can say. We are glad to have grown in stature and, dare we hope it, even in wisdom.

Yet, at the same time, we are painfully aware of other forces acting upon our lives, both from within and from outside us, forces of decay and destruction. Sometimes they nibble around the edges. Sometimes they strike at the heart. Always they leave their mark. Always they leave us less than new, less than whole, less than perfect, less than we wish we could be. Always, they take away from life, love, and true happiness. They diminish us, whether a little at a time or all at once. Oh, to be made new and whole again! And that is what Jesus Christ does for us.

Do you know what I am talking about? It is not a simple contrast between young and old. Even though we live in a culture that glorifies youth, most of us who have survived it would rather not pass that way again, even if we were given the option, which, of course, we are not. Instead of a contrast between young and old, it is a contrast between new and not-so-new, between innocent and guilty, between fresh and tarnished, even between living and dying. It is not just a matter of scars. Scars of the flesh and scars of the spirit show that we have been alive. It is not just a matter of hardship. Adversity can make us stronger. It is, instead, a matter of decay and diminishment, a taking away of life, love, self, and soul. This is the sickness we need to have healed. This is the aging from which we need to be saved. Whatever the good, appropriate, and worthwhile goals of life are, we cannot get there now, not from here. We need a fresh start.

“If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” Whatever else Jesus Christ has done for us, he has done this: we are given a second chance (and for most of us, many more than that), we are given a new beginning, we are given a fresh start, we are given good hope, we are given new life, indeed, we are made new and whole again. The evil that we have done will not be held against us. The sin that we have committed has been taken away. The guilt that we have incurred has been wiped away. The rebellion in which

we engaged has been set aside. The hurt that we have caused—well, the hurt that we have caused God, God has absorbed. As for the hurt we have caused others, and that we and others have caused us, there is now at least the chance that it, too, can be taken away.

This does not mean that life is easy. It does not mean, necessarily, that we are healed of diseases of mind or body, though sometimes that happens, too. Being made new does not mean that we lose our past experiences, our lives, or our selves. But it does mean that we are made new again. We are not remade into infants, but we are made new and whole. We are not taken back to the same starting point we had before, but we are allowed a fresh start where we are, or in some cases, we are even lifted and carried to a new starting point far ahead of where we have ever been before. Christ takes away the sin and guilt of all the things we have done that we should not have done, and of all the things that we should have done that we have not done. He forgives the sin we have committed not only in our worst deeds but also in our best thoughts and actions. Christ takes the weight of those burdens off of us, he breaks the chains off those shackles, he pulls our feet out of that mire, and he makes us new, whole, and alive again. This is the good news.

How is this accomplished? “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” All of this is accomplished by God working in and through Jesus Christ. God did not do this apart from the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Nor did Jesus Christ somehow do this on his own. Instead, it was God working in and through Jesus Christ that brought about our renewal.

Notice that it says that God reconciled us to himself. This means that we are the ones who need to be reconciled to God, not the other way around. We are the ones who have broken the relationship, so we are the ones who need to be restored. It is not God who needs to be reconciled to us. We need to be reconciled to God. And yet, look who does the work: God reconciled us to himself. We messed up, we ought to have to fix it, but we cannot, so God does it for us. We messed up, we ought to have to pay the price, but we cannot, so God does it for us. God reconciled us to himself.

The fact that God did this in, through, and by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ shows the depths of our alienation, the extent of God’s love, and the power of the price paid by Jesus Christ. We have already spoken about the loss of newness in our life. This is not a little problem. This is not a mere inconvenience. This is the sinking away into decay, destruction, and death from which we cannot save ourselves. The fact that Jesus Christ had to die to save us from our sins shows

us how serious our problem is in a way that nothing else can. Otherwise, we might deceive ourselves into thinking that tomorrow we will be better people, that somehow we can make a decision to be good, to love God, to return to what life was meant to be. If it were that simple, Jesus Christ would not have had to have died to make it right. And I guarantee you, the Son of God did not die just to make a point. He did not die to make a spectacle. He did not die to show us something. He did not die for nothing. His life and his death were not wasted. Jesus Christ died because the mess we have made of life is so bad that there was no other way get us out, no other way to forgive our sin, no other way to make us new, no other way to reconcile us to God. The price is too great, the cost too horrible, to consider that anything else, anything less, could have been done. So, the first thing that this shows us is the depth of our alienation from God, and from his Christ, and therefore from each other.

The second thing this shows us is the extent of the love of God. God loves us so much that he is willing to sacrifice his only son for our sake. This, too, is too horrible to contemplate. There is nothing in us to make us worthy of this terrible sacrifice, before or after the fact. We are not that loveable, in and of ourselves, and we cannot, in a hundred years, do enough to repay our debt. The act of God to bring about our reconciliation shows the far-reaching extent of the mighty love and mercy of God, always taking the initiative, loving us for God's own sake even when there is very little or nothing in us that is loveable, doing what needed to be done to restore us to God, our Creator, our Heavenly Father, our Redeemer.

The third thing this shows us is the power of the death of Jesus Christ. In this one person, the God-man, fully divine and fully human, were concentrated all the hopes and all the sins of humanity. Upon his head were placed all the burdens of the world. If he had avoided that death, we would have been lost forever. But he took it. He chose to believe in God, even when it seemed that God had abandoned him. He chose to obey God, even when his obedience meant sure death. He chose to love humanity, even when none of us loved him. He decided that faith, obedience, and love were more important than life itself, so that he would rather die with them than live without them. And so this one believing, obedient, and loving death took away our sin, made us new and whole, and restored and reconciled us to God.

Now, lest our vision grow too narrow, we are told that Christ died not only to reconcile us to God, but to reconcile the world to God. The same had already been said in Isaiah, that God called Israel to be a light, not only unto itself, but unto the nations. Now it is said explicitly of Christ, that in him God was reconciling the world to himself. The presents the universal and cosmic dimensions of God's activity. Though we humans are running away as hard as we can, God's reach is wide enough to gather us all home. Can we run far enough away not to be reached?

I do not think so. Can we hide deep enough never to be found? I do not think so. Can we fall so low that God does not love us? No, we cannot. Though the universe shatter into a thousand pieces, nothing shall be lost. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

There is another part to this. Not only has God reconciled us to himself, but also God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, God has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation. We cannot repeat or add to Christ's perfect sacrifice, nor do we need to do so. But we can tell everyone we know about it. We can share the good news with all the world. We can bear witness to Jesus Christ. We can love one another, even as he has loved us.

How can we carry out this ministry of reconciliation? At a personal level, we can share the message with those about us, at home, at school, at work, and at play. At a congregational level, we can invite and bring people here to worship God, here where the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached each week, here where the message of reconciliation is proclaimed. And at a denominational level, we can support the missionary and evangelistic work of the church in this country and around the world.

Today is stewardship Dedication Sunday. At one level, I have not preached a typical stewardship sermon. And yet at another level, every proclamation of the gospel is a stewardship sermon. Every proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ calls for a response of the self, the whole self, heart, soul, mind, and strength, and that includes our time, talents, and financial resources. Every proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ calls for each of us to make an appropriate response. I have committed myself to tithing and asked you to do the same, and I renew that today. I have talked to you about the importance of the work we do together as a church, as supported by our giving and budget, and I hold that up for you again today. More importantly, today, as we hear and celebrate again the good news of reconciliation, I invite and urge us all to respond to, and to live in, that reconciliation, by giving and pledging to give in such a way that both individually and as a congregation we are worthy messengers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ did not die so that we could be stingy; we can do that well enough on our own. Christ died so that we might be generous and even give sacrificially. Christ did not die so that we could be petty; we can do that well enough on our own. Christ died to elevate us to the high and honorable position of being messengers of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and one of the ways we do that is through giving to support the mission and work of the church. Christ did not die so that we could be rich in the things of the world. Christ died so that we might use the riches of the world that we do have to let the world know about the reconciling love of God in Christ. Christ "died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him

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who for their sake died and was raised.” What a great privilege and responsibility this is!

Finally, Paul writes, “So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” This continues to apply to us today. Perhaps there are some present or listening to the radio who have never made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We invite and urge you to do so, for it is through this faith that we are reconciled to God. Perhaps there are some present or listening to the radio who do not have a church home in the area. We invite and encourage you to join Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, for it is through reconciliation in a congregation of Christ’s church that we learn of his reconciliation of us to God and that we share in the ministry of reconciliation. To follow up on either of these, you may speak with me after worship or call me at church this week. We beseech you to be reconciled to God. Christ did not die for us to ignore him, but for us to be faithful members of his church.

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In just a few moments, we shall receive a new member into the church, on the basis of his reaffirmation of faith. This, in and of itself, is a precious gift he bring us, for as he reaffirms his faith, so are we given the opportunity to reaffirm ours. “If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling to world to himself, not counting trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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