

“Ambassadors for Christ,” 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2 (Trinity Sunday, June 16, 2019)

¹¹ Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. ¹² 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. ¹³ For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and 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.

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For he says, “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

PRAY

We are working through our study on 2 Corinthians on Sunday mornings at Grace, and we read in our passage for this morning where Paul talks about “persuading” others in verse 11. He talks about appealing to the Corinthians in verse 1 of chapter six. He writes about how God as “entrusted to us the message of reconciliation” in verse 19. What’s all this about? Paul is talking about evangelism. Some of you, if you’re new to Christianity, may not be familiar that word. “Evangelism” can be most simply defined as the process by which one person communicates to another person the good news of Jesus Christ.

I’ve found over my years as a Christian that the word “evangelism” conjures up a wide range of feelings and images in people, mostly negative. If you grew up going to church in the South, you’ve probably been made to feel guilty because you haven’t done a lot of evangelism, or as much as you think you should have. Others get a bad taste in their mouths when they hear the word, because they’ve seen preachers in the Grove get red in the face and yell things at passers-by, nasty things you would never say to anyone, supposedly while doing evangelism.

Or maybe you hear the word and just get frustrated. Maybe you’ve gone to some event billed as “evangelistic,” and the people in charge played on the emotions of the audience and manipulated them in order to force some kind of immediate decision, and you’ve thought, “That can’t be biblical or loving. Even though there is truth in what they say the way it’s done feels all wrong.”

What should we think when we hear the word? Paul says, “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” 2 Corinthians 5:20. To be an evangelist means to be an ambassador for Christ.

We will look at evangelism through the lens of being an ambassador and try and answer three questions: *first, who are Christ’s ambassadors? Second, how do Christ’s ambassadors go about their work? Third, what drives Christ’s ambassadors to do their work?*

First, who are Christ’s ambassadors? If you’ve ever visited Washington, D.C. and walked down Massachusetts Avenue, you’ve seen dozens and dozens of embassies from other countries, and each one of them has an ambassador who lives there.

Those ambassadors are not citizens of the United States. They are citizens of their home countries, and they are the official representatives of their countries to the United States. They really has one job: to faithfully communicate the policies and the interests of their governments to our government: not make policy, not argue about the wisdom of the government’s policy, but communicate policy on behalf of their countries.

According to Paul, the high king of the universe, God Almighty himself, has ambassadors. He has sent representatives down to earth to communicate his message to the people of this world.

Who are these ambassadors? If you are a Christian, you are. Paul, who wrote 2 Corinthians, doesn’t say, “I alone am the ambassador for Christ.” No, he says, “we are ambassadors for Christ.”

As a Christian you are an ambassador. This world is not your home anymore. You are, primarily, a citizen of heaven. That’s Philippians 3:20. You are here as a representative of your king in heaven.

And this has a couple of implications: *first, if all Christians are ambassadors for Christ, then evangelism is everyone’s responsibility.* One of the great things about being a small church is that everyone knows it’s “all hands on deck, all the time.” When you only have one hundred people and one staff person, everyone recognizes that there’s got to be a lot of volunteering.

But as Grace has grown into a medium sized church and added staff, and especially if we ever start to grow into a large church, we’re going to have to watch out for the attitude that Grace is a place where the professionals, the paid staff members, do all the work.

Americans are temperamentally inclined to outsource responsibilities, because we live in a consumer economy. And there’s nothing wrong with that in general, but it is a danger when it comes to the church that people will say, “You know, I like my church, I enjoy Sunday mornings, they take care of my kids. I appreciate my church, and I’ll pay my dues appropriately. But I’m don’t really have time to serve, and don’t ask me to share the gospel with other people. That’s what the professionals are for.”

But don't you see? You have a role to play. You have been commissioned by God to go out and share the gospel with others. In fact, **there are certain people in your life who would never listen to me if I told them about Jesus, but they will listen to you.** They trust you precisely because you're not a "professional" Christian. *When you are an ambassador for Christ, it means you can't outsource evangelism.* You must be on the lookout for opportunities to discharge this responsibility.

Being ambassadors for Christ requires us to make an effort to be around non-Christians and try to engage them with the gospel. There are plenty of people in Oxford who will tell you they are not Christians. Are you at least trying to get around them? If not, what kind of ambassador could you possibly be? An ambassador that never leaves home base is not doing his job.

It's Father's Day, we are so thankful for all the faithful dads at Grace. Dads, there's one group of unbelievers you're around all the time. Your young children! I don't say that because they act like a bunch of heathens (though they might) but as young kids they don't have saving faith. Nothing will make your children more likely to believe, Dads, than you reading the Bible to them, talking to them about Jesus, praying with them, joyfully taking them to church and singing, and just generally living your faith out in front of them.

Second, if Christians are ambassadors for Christ, then we must be faithful to the message given to us. Kichisaburo Nomura was the Japanese ambassador to the United States at the outbreak of World War II. Nomura had worked diligently throughout 1941 with Cordell Hull, the U.S. Secretary of State at the time, to prevent war between the U.S. and Japan. He didn't want war, he thought war would be a disaster for Japan, and Normura believed his government when they said they also did not want war. But his government did not tell him that the Imperial Navy had attacked Pearl Harbor until after the attack began on Sunday morning, December 7, 1941. He was shocked. He said after the war, "I must have been the worst informed ambassador in history." Yet he still had to walk to the State Department and tell Cordell Hull personally that the Japanese no longer wanted to negotiate with the U.S., and by then of course Hull himself knew of the attack.

Don't you know that Nomura had no desire to communicate that message? Don't you know he wished he could modify it somehow? But he couldn't. His responsibility to his government was to be faithful and deliver the message, whether he wanted to or not. The analogy isn't perfect because his government was wrong while he was right. For Christians, our government in heaven is never wrong.

Yet it is true that if you are an ambassador for Christ, there will be times when you need to explain some part of the gospel message but you won't want to, because you know it will offend. You're afraid it will be misunderstood. You'll want to leave out the parts about sin, about judgment, about hell, and about how Jesus is the only way, the truth, and the life. You'll be so tempted to alter the gospel message somehow to make it more palatable. But you can't. *It's not your message. You're an ambassador, so you don't make the message; you deliver the message.*

I can't tell you how many times over the years as a preacher I've been tempted to change the message of the Bible so people won't get offended. I don't want people mad at me and not

coming back to Grace. But I don't have a choice. Paul says in verse 12: "*We are not commending ourselves to you again ...*" 2 Corinthians 5:12. Paul says Christians are ambassadors, and we can't worry whether the recipients will like us after they hear our message.

Second, how are Christ's ambassadors to share the gospel with others? I need to make a distinction here. Some people are especially gifted by God to be evangelists. They are able to strike up a conversation with wide range of people and quickly get to a meaningful gospel interaction. God also seems to use them in a powerful way to bring people into the kingdom. Everything I'm about to say does not apply to them. They are the unicorns. You can't teach what they do. I'm not one of those people, but we've got a few in our church and I thank God for them. If that's you, you have permission to tune out what I'm about to say. Rather, what I'm about to say I address to the vast majority of us who aren't gifted by God in that way.

Three things about how Christ's ambassadors share the gospel: *first, make sure you treat the people you're sharing the gospel with as people, not as projects.* At several seminaries, they require their students engage in a certain number of evangelistic conversations before they can graduate. That was true of the seminary I attended and I think, on the whole, it's a good thing. But it can be a bad thing if your definition of an "evangelistic conversation" is too narrow.

One seminary that has this requirement produced a guide for how to these conversations should go, and I'll just read some of it to you: "Start a casual conversation [with either someone you know or don't know]. Talk about something pleasant. Get on a friendly basis but do not let the conversation stay casual. You can start anywhere in any conversation and use [these tactics]. First ask, 'Have you been thinking much about spiritual things?' It does not matter what you are talking about, you can just start. Whatever he answers you can go immediately to the second thing. 'What would you say is a person's greatest spiritual need?' Whatever he says you can go immediately to the third thing. 'The Bible says that it is a salvation experience. Have you had a definite experience with Christ sometime in the past?'"

What's the problem with that approach? The person doing the evangelism is not interested in the person he's talking to at all. He's not interested in learning about that person, and he's not even entertained the possibility that he could learn *from* that person. That person is just a project to him. His job is to manipulate the conversation until he can talk about the Bible.

Not only is it not loving to treat a person as a project, it's also almost always ineffective. People can generally tell the difference between when you're trying to get to know someone and when you're trying to close the deal.

Contrast that method of evangelism with how Ken Smith and his wife Floy practice evangelism. They read a letter to the editor in their local newspaper that was critical of Christianity, and they noticed it was written by a professor at the local university. This professor turned out to be a rather radical atheist. Ken wrote this professor directly and said, "You've got some valid points about Christians, but I think you've also misunderstood certain parts of the Bible's message. I'm a pastor and my wife and I would like to invite you to supper at our house. If you're not comfortable coming to a stranger's home, we'd be glad to meet you at a local restaurant. You

can ask us anything you want.” This professor was so intrigued by this letter (she’d only gotten hate mail from Christians before) that she took Ken Smith up on his offer.

The first time the professor came to Smith’s house he didn’t evangelize her or invite her to church. He simply prayed before the meal, they ate, and talked for two hours. He gave her some suggested reading, and she left. That began a friendship between the Smiths and this professor that went on for two years before she ever set foot in his church. A couple of years after that, she became a Christian, and now she, Rosaria Butterfield, is herself a pastor’s wife. When you ask Rosaria now why she kept going back to this pastor’s house, she’ll say it’s because it was clear to her that to the Smiths she was a person, not a project. She’d been studying evangelicals as a part of her research so she expected a hard-sell gospel presentation when she went to their house, and when she didn’t get it she began to trust them. They broke her paradigm for how a Christian is supposed to behave, and it opened an avenue for evangelism.

I’m not saying it’s wrong to share the gospel the first time you meet a complete stranger. I’m not saying you have to wait until the person knows you love them until you can tell them about Jesus. But I am saying this: *there is an art to evangelism*. One size will not fit all.

As you read the Bible, you’ll see that nowhere is there a prescribed gospel presentation. There’s no one “right” way to do it. In fact, I think it’s accurate to say that in the New Testament, the gospel is never presented in precisely the same way twice. The authors are always putting a new spin on it.

Let me be clear: the gospel remains the same. Sooner or later, the person you’re talking to must understand there is a God, you have offended him by your sins, but Jesus Christ lived the life you should have lived and on the cross died the death you deserved to die, and you must believe, you must put your faith in, that good news. The gospel doesn’t change.

But each person you talk to is different, with different life experiences and different beliefs and a different personality. 2 Corinthians 5:11a: “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.” If you’re going to persuade, you won’t always be able to present the gospel the same way, and you won’t always be able to start at the same time in the relationship. You may be able to immediately get to the gospel with one person. With another, it might take a long time before they trust you. Some will be offended, some will be bored, and some will believe.

In verse 20, we read this: “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. *We implore you* on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” Telling others the good news of Jesus involves skill, creativity, thoughtfulness, emotion, patience, and you may have to learn some new things in order to share with people. It’s an art, but because it’s an art you can and should work to get better at it.

Second, there must be urgency about our evangelism. If you’re here today, and you’re not a Christian, we are very glad you’re here. And maybe you are here this morning and the gospel makes sense to you, it’s attractive to you, and you want to believe it ... but you just don’t feel like today is the time. You’re thinking about all the changes you’d have to make in your life and all the hard conversations you’d have to have if you became a Christian, so you hold back.

You know what Paul says to you? Paul quotes Isaiah 49 and say, “‘In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’ Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” 2 Corinthians 6:2. Paul says, “Now!”

Why is Paul so insistent here? Why “now”? Because Paul knows how the human heart works. Friends, you do not have the power and the control over your heart you think you have. If you’re feeling open to do something and you know you should do it but you’re afraid to do it, don’t dare think that window of opportunity is going to be open forever. It won’t be.

In the book of Hebrews we read about Esau. If you remember from the book of Genesis, he made some horrible decisions, including selling his birthright to his brother for a pot of stew. In Hebrews 12:17 we read this, “For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.” He was no longer able to go back to where he was before and make himself repent.

Ten days from now, 10 months from now, and certainly 10 years from now, you may very well be incapable of doing the thing that right now you know you ought to do. If you’re open, then please decide *now*. *There may not be another chance.*

Third, there must be earnestness about our evangelism. If we have a modern notion about the job of ambassadors, we’ll miss something of what Paul is trying to say. Today all countries have ambassadors in the capital cities of countries with whom they have diplomatic relations. But the Romans, who Paul had in mind when he wrote 2 Corinthians, did not. The Romans did not recognize any other power with whom they could co-exist peacefully.

Yet they did have ambassadors. But here’s how they used them: when a Roman army defeated its foe, the commanding general would send an ambassador to the enemy. But the ambassador *did not negotiate with the enemy*. His message was “Submit to these terms or perish.”

When Jesus Christ came into the world, he didn’t say, “I am here to negotiate with you about how much you’d be willing to serve God.” Jesus comes to his enemies, he comes to sinners who have been in rebellion against him, and he says, “I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. I love you, but you must submit to me, or you will perish.”

When Christians share the gospel we are, at a fundamental level, saying to others, “Submit to the Lord Jesus or perish.” In our sins, we have committed high treason against the king of the universe, and that treason merits not just the death penalty, but the eternal death penalty in hell. Christian friends, the thought of what we’re saying when we evangelize should stagger us. There must be an earnestness about your evangelism. It can’t always be light-hearted.

Now, that’s really hard – urgent and earnest with our evangelism, but with the patience and skill that comes from knowing that there’s an art to it? How can we do it?

Third, what drives Christ’s ambassadors to do their work? When you’re doing evangelism, really all you’re doing is introducing Jesus to other people. You’re not forcing people to form a

relationship with Jesus. That's the Holy Spirit's job. And think about it: you are way more effective at introducing people you know really well than people you don't.

Say, for some reason, I was given the responsibility of introducing someone to you on the spot that I barely knew; a stranger. I might stumble through – hopefully I wouldn't call him by the wrong name, maybe I could say something interesting about him, but that's it. If I didn't know the person well it would be hard for me to be excited about getting the two of you together.

But if I had the opportunity to introduce you to someone whom I loved, like my wife or my kids or my closest friends, then it would go differently. You'd see how much I care about them. I'd know all kind of things about them that could make them seem interesting to you.

My love for them makes my introductions of the people closest to me so much more effective. That's what Paul says should drive our evangelism: "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died..." 2 Corinthians 5:14.

The more you love Jesus, the better evangelist you'll be. Friends, ***we talk about what we think about, and we think about what we love.*** If you love Jesus, he'll be on your mind all the time, and if he's on your mind he will be on your tongue. You won't be able to help it – you'll want to talk about him and introduce him to others.

And because you love Jesus, you'll want to personally introduce him to others. You won't want to contract that out. You'll trust him enough to be faithful to his message, and not try to modify it to humor others. Finally, because you love Jesus you'll devote the time and energy to developing the art of evangelism so that you can make him appealing to others, because you enjoy spending so much time with him yourself.

And why should we love Jesus? 2 Corinthians 5:21 deserves a sermon all by itself. It is the best one verse encapsulation of the gospel in the whole Bible. "21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God, didn't just take our sin on him, *he became sin*. He who had neither stain, nor wrinkle, nor blemish, became sin, became a curse Galatians 3 says, for us.

Why did Jesus do it? To make us acceptable to God? Tolerated by God? Grudgingly allowed into heaven by God? No – so that we might be "the righteousness of God." That's an astounding phrase.

Just think how righteous Jesus was when he was in heaven before he came down to earth to live as a human being. He was so perfect, so loved by God, so known by God, so pure, holy, and happy, totally content. But friends, if we trust Jesus now, knowing that even though we have displeased God in thousands of ways by our sins Jesus died for us, that for our sake he who knew no sin was made sin, then we become just like that – "the righteousness of God." Not just tolerated by God, crowned as heirs of the universe by God. And when you see that, to the degree you see that, you'll love Jesus. And you'll want to tell others about him. PRAY