

The Ministry of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

A preacher felt his sermon wouldn't be palatable to his congregation, so he asked God for a message to deliver to the congregation. He waited for the message, but didn't get a message from God the whole week long, and so he couldn't prepare a sermon for Sunday. He stepped onto the pulpit on Sunday and asked the audience, "Do you know what God would say to us today?" The audience loudly responded, "No." The preacher said, "I don't know either!" And he stepped down from the pulpit.

The next week, also, the preacher spent the whole week in the same way. Again, he didn't get a message from God, and didn't prepare a sermon for Sunday. He again stepped onto the pulpit on Sunday and asked the audience, "Do you know what God would say to us today?" This time, the audience loudly responded, differently from last Sunday, "Yes!" Then, the preacher said, "You already know what God would say today. So I don't need to say anything!" And he stepped down from the pulpit.

On the third week the preacher also spent the week relaxing, and he didn't prepare a sermon for Sunday. He again stepped onto the pulpit on Sunday and asked the audience, "Do you know what God would say to us today?" Then, the audience was split on the response. Some said, "Yes," some said, "No." Then, the preacher said, "Fine! Those who don't know, ask those who do know!" Again, the preacher stepped down from the pulpit.

When I found the scripture reading in the lectionary for this Sunday, 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21, no idea popped into my mind. My anguish started from the Wednesday through Friday. "What could I preach through this scripture?" was my anguish. Now, I have to preach today. I sensed that God would say to me, "I already gave you my words, so find the words I gave you in your life." Let me ask you, "Do you know what God would say to you today?" Yes, the ministry of reconciliation is my sermon title.

Last Thursday, I read an internet news page from Korea. It read, "The famous Buddhist monk, Pup-Chung died." He is respected by the people of Korea not only inside the Buddhist faith, but also outside of Buddhism. Through his life, he insisted, "Not having. Rather, give and share what you have more than you need." Several years ago, one of my friends in Korea sent me a book that this Buddhist Monk wrote, "Flowers blossom in the mountain."

I found the book from my book shelf and read some chapters. It read, "If there is no death in life, there is no meaning for life." His saying popped into my head. He is a Buddhist Monk, but he had faith in life eternal. He seeks the meaning of life in giving and sharing with others. He said, "If you have something, more than you need, the things you own will own you. Then, you will be a slave of the things you own." That is true. Today, we will have a special offering, One Great Hour Sharing, during Communion, voluntarily. One Great Hour Sharing is the offering for world mission among all United Methodists"

In today's scripture reading, Paul enlightens us of three things.

First, Paul exhorts us, "Don't look upon yourselves according to a worldly point of view. Rather, see yourselves through the eyes of the grace of Christ. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" This declaration of self identity is a powerful encouragement for us. Being a new creation means you can start your life again. With new enthusiasm, new strength, and a new walk, we are empowered by the spirit of Lord. You and I are worthy to have new life.

Second, furthermore, Paul recommends to us, "He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." That is the turning point of our life to pursue. Today's scripture says to be a Christian means that we should no longer live for ourselves, but for him who died for us.

For the third step in new life, Paul challenges us to take part in the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, be a minister of Christ. Let me test your memory whether you still remember a story I once shared. This is a story of a gorilla. Do you remember that story?

A pastor had some problems and decided to leave the ministry. He pronounced that he would quit his job publicly. However, he couldn't find other work. Finally, in desperation, he took a job at the local zoo. The gorilla had died, and since it had been the children's favorite animal, the zoo officials decided to put someone in a gorilla costume until a real replacement could be found.

It was the minister's job to don the costume, hop around the cage, and entertain the kids. To his amazement, he found it the best job he'd ever held. He was getting more attention than he ever had in the pulpit. He could eat all he wanted. There was no stress – no complaints, no committees, no pressures. And he could take a nap in the sun anytime – it was all part of the act.

One day as he hopped up and down, he felt so frisky he decided to try the trapeze. But, as he swung high, he lost his grip, flew over the bars, and landed in the next cage! Stunned and dazed, he looked up and he found that he had landed in the lion's cage. He saw a ferocious lion walking slowly and approaching him. Of course, in his panic, he forgot he was supposed to be a gorilla and screamed, "Help! Help!" The lion said, "Be quiet!" and sat beside him. "Are you the Lion King?" he asked. "Hey buddy, be quiet! I'm a minister too!" The Lion as king is a character in fantasy novels for children. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by C.S. Lewis, Aslan, a Lion and highest king of all Narnia, is a figure of Christ, the King who died, resurrected, ascended and will return. Of course, it is not a true story but a Christian allegory. Still, this story tells us something to think about for our mission.

Will you say this with me? "Hey! I'm a minister too!"

In English, the word “person” comes from the ancient Roman word, “persona,” which meant a mask. It also refers to an individual who had full Roman citizenship. A citizen could demonstrate his or her lineage through imagination, death masks of ancestors. In modern society, people think that the social role of a person can be identified as his or her identity. The social role implies the mask, in other words. So, everybody wears his or her mask on their faces.

I was an army chaplain in Korea. I had to wear an army uniform during work on the military base. I had two signs of identity: a badge of rank and a badge of the chaplaincy. My status of rank was a captain, but my role in the army was a chaplain.

When I was assigned to a brigade chaplain, I had no experience at all, even though I was commissioned as captain. As you know, a military runs on a strict line of command and a system of order. From the top to bottom, there has to be a strict order of commanding. I was a captain, but it was not a high rank in my brigade. The colonel, the commander was my top boss. My commander was a gentleman who had graduated from the military academy. And, he was a Christian. He suggested to me that my preaching be prepared to be helpful for his command, regardless of the Christian message. I was astonished by his request.

I started my work, working day and night. I worked very hard. I sensed that the military compound was masculine and a fierce community, and needed a mothering role in a chaplain for the care-taking of souls. I had four chaplain assistants. I called them and gave them assignments: Make coffee and bring it to every sentry guard between 2:00-3:00 a.m. every Wednesday. And, pray for them if they would like it.

One of my assistants was not a Christian, and problem-maker in his battalion. The commander of his battalion sent him to the chaplaincy office as an assistant because he was such a problem-maker. I asked him what he did before being enrolled in the military. He said he had been a baker for ten years in a famous bakery in Seoul. I asked him what he would like to do in my office. He said he would like to make donuts, if available. I said, fine. Tell me what you will need to make two-thousand donuts, and how long it will take. He said a couple hundred dollars and five hours would be enough.

On the morning of December 24, 1977, he started making donuts. He made two thousand four hundred donuts by three o'clock p.m. There were eleven hundred soldiers in my military compound, and my four assistants delivered two thousand four hundred donuts on Christmas Eve to the barracks. These gifts were reported by someone to the division commander, a general.

He wished to see me. And, actually he visited my chapel one day. As you may know, a visit from a general is not a common occurrence. Everybody would be tense and anxious anticipating a general's visit. Everybody was tense, even in the chapel. I preached in a humorous way, not fitting into a military atmosphere. I welcomed him and honored his visit, and asked him to come forward to give a word of encouragement to the soldiers. He encouraged them with words of assurance. I joked with him. My joke tickled his mind,

and he laughed in front of the soldiers and told them, “You have a wonderful chaplain, and you are blessed.”

I was apparently the first person to make him laugh, and dared to make a joke in front of him. There was no gap between him and me, in terms of rank. We were just fellow human beings. After that incident, the mood of the military compound changed from rigid to harmonious. I held a retreat for the families of soldiers. I opened a Vacation Bible School on the military compound for the children of soldiers. I attended every elementary graduation in which my soldiers’ children were a part, and gave them special recognition and small prizes in front of their parents and friends. I was not just chaplain, but a pastor of soldiers. I baptized more than fifty soldiers on Easter Sunday. Everyone in the compound saluted me first, regardless of his rank, except the commander.

What I did was by the authority of a minister, which was given by God. It was not by authority given by military rank. I gave a cross pin to the leaderships last Sunday. That meant you are a minister in your residence, in your work place, and to your neighbors. If you do your ministry well, God will be pleased and the church will grow as a result.

Recently, I heard this remarkable story about a man named John. He is now a successful doctor. John tells a remarkable story out of his own experience. Some years ago, just after his medical training, just as he was beginning his medical career, John developed a serious heart problem. He became a likely candidate for a fatal heart attack. His close friends began to pray for him, but the harsh prospect of a massive heart attack was hard for John to handle. In his grieving, he began to feel sorry for himself. He became somewhat angry with God. “How could God let this happen to me? How? At the beginning of my career? I worked so hard, prepared so well to be a good doctor, and now this. It isn’t fair!”

One morning, as John was brooding in his office, his father, who was a retired doctor, suddenly rushed in. Excited, his father said, “John, get on that phone right now and call the hospital. Tell them we are on our way! Tell them to get ready to operate on us immediately!”

“Operate on us?” John said. “Dad, what on the earth are you talking about?” You’ve lost me! What do you mean, ‘operate on us?’ ” His father said, “John, my career is over, and yours is just beginning. I have many great hopes and dreams for you. I’ve been studying about transplants, and I want us to go the hospital together today, because I want to give my good heart!”

John hugged his dad tightly. Together they cried. That special moment touched John so powerfully that for the first time, his hope was restored. The story has a happy ending. John was able to have a bypass surgery a short time later, and he was healed. He didn’t have to have a transplant. This story is a metaphor of a father’s heart. The heavenly father, God, gave us his Son for a life transplant!

You are a new being. You are supposed to live, not for yourself, but for him whose life was transplanted to you. So you are a minister too! May your ministry be fruitful! Amen.