

MISSIONAL METAPHORS: YOU ARE AN AMBASSADOR 2 CORINTHIANS 5:14-21

When he was Secretary of State during the Reagan administration, George Shultz kept a large globe in his office. When newly appointed ambassadors had an interview with him and when ambassadors returning from their posts for their first visit with him were leaving his office, Shultz would test them. He would say, "You have to go over to the globe and prove to me that you can identify your country." They would go over, spin the globe, and put their finger on the country to which they were being sent. This happened without fail. When Shultz's old friend and former Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield was appointed ambassador to Japan, even he was put to the test. This time, however, Ambassador Mansfield spun the globe and put his hand on the United States. He said: "That's my country." George Shultz says, "I've told that story, subsequently, to all the ambassadors going out. 'Never forget you're over there in that country, but your country is the United States. You're there to represent us. Take care of our interests and never forget it. You're representing the best country in the world.'" It's vitally important when you're an ambassador to remember who you represent.

You may not realize it this morning, but if you're a follower of Jesus you, also, are an ambassador. That's what the Bible calls you. Let's read 2 Corinthians 5:14-21. You represent Jesus Christ in this world. You represent the Kingdom of God among all the other nations of this world. You've been sent as an ambassador by King Jesus from that heavenly, spiritual country to this earthly, physical country of the United States of America. And that's true of every other follower of Jesus in and to every other country on the face of the Earth. You're an ambassador.

From last Sunday through the end of this month we're exploring again what the Bible says about mission and outreach. Last week, I said that not every follower of Jesus is called to be a full-time, "go overseas to a different country" kind of missionary, but every follower of Jesus is called to be missional. To be missional simply means that you are looking for ways to point people to salvation by and transformation through Jesus by your everyday words and actions. The Bible is full of metaphors - word pictures or analogies - to help us understand that we're called to be missional. So when the apostle Paul calls us ambassadors here in 2 Corinthians 5, he's using yet another missional metaphor. As an ambassador of King Jesus you have a message and a ministry. Let's think about your message.

THE AMBASSADOR'S MESSAGE

First of all, as a follower of Jesus - as His ambassador - one word sums up your message: reconciliation. There it is in v. 19, "For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation." (2 Cor 5:19 NLT) Secondly, your

message also has something to do with relationships. Reconciliation presupposes human relationships of some kind: people relating (or not relating) to one another as friends, family members, neighbors, co-workers, fellow students, fellow citizens, whatever. Since God Himself is a Person, it involves your relationship with Him as well. Thirdly, your message involves God working in and through you to restore broken relationships. That's what that word "reconciliation" is all about. Everybody here has had a relationship with someone else go bad or get broken at some point in your life. Reconciliation happens when a good relationship that went bad for some reason gets good again!

Now the Bible suggests that this message of reconciliation you've been given as Jesus' ambassador touches at least three levels. The first level is the restoration of your relationship with God Himself. Most people today don't realize that their actions, their attitudes and their whole approach to life has alienated them from God. The Bible calls that stuff sin. Because each of us are sinners, you begin life tragically separated from the greatest Person in all of the universe - God Himself. Your relationships with God starts off broken. You need to be reconciled to God. Everyone needs to be reconciled to God.

Part of being missional is the willingness to share with other people verbally how to get reconciled to God. One of the very best statements of what that message of reconciliation should include is right there in v. 21, "For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ." (2 Cor 5:21 NLT) "For God made Christ" - that's God taking the initiative to reach out to you first, because no one ever reaches out to God first - "who never sinned" - Jesus was sinless; He was morally perfect - "to be the offering for our sin" - Jesus took both the guilt and the penalty of death for our sins upon Himself - "so that we could be made right with God through Christ" - God now declares you "not guilty" for your sins and enters into a new, eternal relationship with you because of what Jesus did.

When you place your trust in Jesus and what He did through His death and resurrection, you get reconciled back to God. You realize you can't earn or deserve reconciliation; instead, you receive it as a gift from God. It's both an event and a process. It started the moment you said, "God, here I am. Please forgive me. I give my life to you." It continues and develops your whole life long. Where there was once hostility towards God, now you love God. Where there was once indifference to God, now God is your greatest interest and passion. Where there was once dark anxiety about God and fear of God, now you have joy in Him and bold confidence to approach Him day or night.

The first reconciliation is restoring your relationship with God. The second level of reconciliation is restoring your relationship with yourself. Once you get things right with God, you can start getting things right with yourself. The fact is that all of us have a broken relationship with ourselves. Your own sins - as well as the sins of others against you - create these deep reservoirs of guilt and shame.

There's all this broken, dark, messy stuff inside each of us. But when you get reconciled to God, He begins the process of getting you truly reconciled to yourself. He forgives sin. He banishes shame. He heals and restores. He brings release and freedom. He gets you thinking and living in an entirely transformed way. He cleans out the crud and the fact is that all of us have crud that needs to be cleaned out! Everything begins to change.

That's what Paul was getting at here when he said, "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Cor 5:17 NLT) The true you, the real you begins to emerge. It's based on a whole new orientation to life - why you live it and how you live it. Paul points to it here in our passage, "He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them." (2 Cor 5:15 NLT) We just naturally think that God exists to take care of us, make life easy for us, and provide for us when the truth is that we exist for God. The more you make life about yourself, the less satisfying life becomes. The more you make life about God, about His mission, about His purpose, about finding your place in that mission and purpose, the more satisfying life becomes.

Then, there's a third level to this whole message of reconciliation you've been given as Jesus' ambassador - restoring your relationship with others. When you become a follower of Jesus, your relationships with others will get better over time. Not all the time. Not with everyone. But knowing Jesus personally will change the majority of your relationships for the better. The fact that the Holy Spirit lives in you now and is changing your character will mean that you're becoming easier to live with, you're growing in kindness to and consideration of others, you're learning how to show compassion and caring. If that's not happening, maybe you need to ask yourself if the Holy Spirit does live within you! As an ambassador of King Jesus you have a message of reconciliation about a restored relationship with God, yourself and others, but you also have a ministry.

THE AMBASSADOR'S MINISTRY

Obviously, an ambassador's ministry is, first of all, representing Jesus to other people. That's the whole point of Paul calling you an ambassador. On an earthly level, you could be a citizen of over 200 countries the world over. But on a spiritual level, you can be a citizen of only two countries - two kingdoms, two realms, two nations - that are bitterly opposed to each other, that seek each other's defeat and that are enemies to the end. Every follower of Jesus is a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Your real home is Heaven and you are today an ambassador for the King of kings and the Lord of lords. But there is another kingdom - a kingdom of evil ruled by the devil who hates God, opposes God and wants to destroy the people of God. You start out in that kingdom; we all do. In that kingdom, the devil keeps you in bondage to your sin. He hates you and will

do everything in his power to make sure you live out your life blinded to God's love. His entire mission is to keep you away from God and His Kingdom.

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be an ambassador representing the United States in another country? Let's say it was Afghanistan. Lots of Afghans do not like Americans at the present time. Imagine living there in Afghanistan among people who speak a different language, practice different traditions and live out a different culture. Your job would be to represent the United States at all times - the interests, concerns, positions, values and welfare of our country. That's what an ambassador does. You share life with Afghans day in and day out while representing the United States at all times and in every conceivable situation. I'm all but certain that as you lived among the ordinary Afghani people, you would grow to like and maybe even care deeply about some of them. You'd realize that they aren't our country's real enemy. Many of them are victims of forces beyond their control.

As a follower of Jesus, you live in this world, but you're not of this world. You live in a world controlled in many ways by the kingdom of evil, but you're a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Your task is to represent Jesus in this world at all times - Jesus' interests, Jesus' concerns, Jesus' positions, Jesus' values and Jesus' message. As you share life with people in this world everyday - family, friends, neighbors, co-workers - you become available to point people to Jesus with your lips and your life. That's what being missional is all about. And as you live among these people and share life with them, you begin to see them in a different light entirely. You start to have the same attitude towards them that Jesus did to people in His day, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." (Matt 9:36 NLT) You realize they really aren't your enemy. They are blinded and controlled by a power greater than themselves. Your ministry as an ambassador for Jesus, then, is to help as many of them as possible to change their spiritual citizenship like you did - to turn traitor against the devil and his kingdom of evil and, instead, become followers of Jesus and citizens of the Kingdom of God.

The story goes that a young man applied for a job as an usher at a theater in the mall. The manager asked him, "What would you do in case a fire breaks out?" The young man answered, "Don't worry about me. I'd get out OK." That's not the answer the manager was looking for.... That can mirror the attitude of some followers of Jesus. "What would you do if Jesus came back tomorrow and eternity began?" "Oh, don't worry about me. I'll be OK." But you're a spiritual usher! You're a doorkeeper into the house of God! It isn't enough just to get yourself out. God is calling and expecting you to help others get out to.

When I went through the Evangelism Explosion training years ago, I learned of an amazing statistic. Two years after becoming followers of Jesus, 95% of us have no meaningful relationships with a non-Christian. Why is that? Let's go back to that ambassador to Afghanistan analogy. If you're an American living in

Afghanistan, and you have a choice of hanging out with a few Americans or a whole bunch of Afghanis, what are you probably going to choose? The longer you're a follower of Jesus, the easier it gets to spend all your time with people who love Jesus and share your values. But you can't be an ambassador for King Jesus - at least not a very good one - if that's your choice all of the time. I'll admit it to you today. One of my greatest personal challenges in life is beginning, developing and nurturing relationships with people who aren't followers of Jesus yet and then trusting God for the opportunity to point them to Jesus at the right time. Ask yourself, "Am I really functioning as an ambassador for King Jesus?"

Secondly, an ambassador's ministry is prompted by love, motivated by love and practiced in love. That's made clear in today's text. Paul says here, "...Christ's love controls us...." (2 Cor 5:14 NLT) That word "control" or "compel" has behind it the idea of two walls holding you in and keeping you on track. It's as if Paul says, "I feel the love of Jesus so powerfully that when I want to drift off this way, it holds me in. When I want to wander off in that direction, it holds me in. I just can't escape the love of Christ. It constrains me, controls me, compels me. It keeps me on track." The more you experience Jesus' love for you, the more you love Jesus in return. The more you love Jesus, the more you will come to love people for whom Jesus died and rose again. How does God motivate you to be His ambassador? Love! He inundates you in His love, fills you with His love and keeps you in His love. And the more you experience that love, the more you want to share it with others who are blind to it.

Love is the only real motivation to act as King Jesus' ambassador. You don't represent Jesus because you'll feel guilty if you don't. You don't represent Jesus out of a sense of duty. At the end of the day, the only reason to do it is because you're so grateful and you've come to love Jesus. Because you've received His love, you want to share that same love with those who haven't discovered it yet. And then, of course, an effective ambassador for King Jesus practices his or her ministry in love. You reach out to people, you draw people in, you show compassion and you allow Jesus' love to flow through you to them.

Do you have to have the Bible memorized to be Jesus' ambassador? No. You have to love people. Do you have to know the biblical answer to every question or doubt about God that a person might have? No. You have to love people. Do you have to be perfect and have a problem free life? No. You have to love people. If once you trusted Jesus, you never experienced chronic illness, you never had a financial problem, you never endured marital struggles, you never felt at wit's end over your kid's choices and behavior, or you never had someone close to you die, who would ever see the difference Jesus makes in the midst of life's problems? There's only one requirement to be Jesus' ambassador. You have to love people.

Just recently, Evangelical Christianity in our country lost one of its most articulate spokesman. Charles Colson passed away at the age of 80. Many of you

remember him as one of the major Watergate scandal personalities in the early 1970s. He spend time in jail himself, became a committed follower of Jesus, and established a national ministry to prisoners. He also became a very effective ambassador for King Jesus. In one of his books, Colson tells the story of being invited by a successful businessman - let's call him Mr. Abercrombie - to speak at a Bible study he hosted. Nineteen other movers and shakers of the business world were in attendance.

Mr. Abercrombie had asked Colson to speak at the luncheon and then allow time for questions. Somewhere in his talk Colson referred to our sinful nature. Actually, "total depravity" was the phrase he used. He noticed at the time that a few individuals shifted uncomfortably in their leather chairs. After he finished, sure enough, the first question was on sin. "You don't really believe we are sinners, do you? I mean, you're too sophisticated to be one of those hellfire-and-brimstone fellows," one older gentleman said. "Intelligent people don't go for that back-country preacher stuff," he added. "Yes, sir," Colson replied. "I believe we are desperately sinful. What's inside of each of us is really pretty ugly. In fact we deserve hell and would get it, but for the sacrifice of Christ for our sins." Mr. Abercrombie himself looked distressed by now. "Well, I don't know about that," he said. "I'm a good person and have been all my life. I go to church, and I get exhausted spending all my time doing good works."

Colson responded, "If you believe that, Mr. Abercrombie—and I hate to say this, for you certainly won't invite me back—you are, for all of your good works, further away from the kingdom than the people I work with in prison who are aware of their own sins." Someone at the other end of the table coughed. Another rattled his coffee cup. And a flush quickly worked its way up from beneath Mr. Abercrombie's starched white collar. "In fact, gentlemen," Colson added, "If you think about it, we are all really more like Adolf Hitler than like Jesus Christ." Now there was stony silence...until someone eased the pain and changed the subject.

When lunch ended and Colson was preparing to leave, Mr. Abercrombie took his arm. "Didn't you say you wanted to make a phone call when we were finished?" Colson started to say it wasn't necessary, then realized he wanted to get Colson alone. "Yes, thank you," Colson said. Mr. Abercrombie led him down the corridor to an empty office. As soon as they were inside, he said bluntly, "I don't have what you have." "I know," Colson replied, "but you can. God is touching your heart right now." "No, no," he took a step back. "Maybe sometime." Colson pressed a bit more, however, and moments later they were both on their knees. Mr. Abercrombie asked forgiveness of his sins and turned his life over to Christ.

Here's a final thought. If you're an follower of Jesus today, you are an ambassador for Jesus. It doesn't matter if you agree or not, like it or not, or accept it or not. You're an ambassador, like it or not. The great question - the real question - is this one: what kind of an ambassador are you?