

Pr. Ben Adams
Fourth Sunday in Lent
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Ambassadors of Reconciliation

When I was in seminary two of the most impactful books that I read were volume one and two of a book series by Ched Myers and Elaine Enns called *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*.

I read these as I took a class called Ministry to the Incarcerated and their Families. The books were prophetic to me as they elaborated on our call to be peacemakers and how we can engage in the work of restorative justice. Now if you've never heard of restorative justice it is the opposite of what we commonly understand in our current criminal justice system of retributive justice. You see, restorative justice focuses on victim-offender reconciliation and communal healing, while retributive justice is punitive, harsh, and in many ways does not heal, but puts another layer of pain and trauma on an already broken situation.

I was reminded of these principles that I learned from these books as I read the words from Paul in Second Corinthians that we heard today that say, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

It is because we have been reconciled to God through Christ that we have now been given the opportunity to be ambassadors of reconciliation ourselves.

Now I love the word ambassador because it has such a stately impressive feel to it. And it in fact means an accredited diplomat sent by a country as its official representative to a foreign country.

And as I thought about that definition, I thought, that is exactly what we are. In our baptism, our citizenship was declared to us in heaven, and it is God who is the "president of heaven" to whom we report and whom we represent as ambassadors. Our call of duty is to be the ones who share what we know from our country of heaven and what we know is reconciliation, and we share this reconciliation in this foreign country – this place we call earth, a place filled with division, brokenness and estrangement. It is in this very place that we have been entrusted as ambassadors of reconciliation. We are the ones whom God has sent to make bridges across ideological and cultural divides, to seek wholeness in a broken world, and to foster unity where we have become estranged.

And not only does this call to be ambassadors of reconciliation come from Paul today, but we are reminded of this call as well in our Gospel of Luke where we hear one of the most recognized parables in all of scripture. The parable often referred to as *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. And while I think that much of the focus of the parable centers around the younger son who takes his share of his father's inheritance only to squander it and eventually come back home where he is welcomed with a beautiful robe and a party where his father kills the fatted calf, I think this parable needs a new name.

One author calls this parable, *The Parable of a Father Reconciling Estranged Brothers*, but to make it a more expansive title to which we can all relate and situate ourselves in, let's call it *The Parable of a Parent Reconciling Estranged Siblings*.

I like that title much more because there is a whole other brother in this story that gets overlooked if we focus all of our attention on the younger prodigal sibling. The elder sibling is in many ways more loyal to their parent, but in believing they are somehow more righteous, they still miss the grace that the parent is offering.

Because when the parent decides to throw a party for the sibling who spent their time and squandered their resources with dissolute living, the righteous sibling just cannot believe that it's even happening, so refuses to come to the party altogether! And the climax moment of this story, when we realize that the siblings are so deeply estranged, is when the older sibling will not even recognize the other as their sibling but refers to them as "that child of yours."

The parent in this parable not only runs out to greet the younger sibling when they come home, but the parent also has to leave the party to plead with the older sibling to join the party.

And I think what I love most about this text is that it leaves the ending as a cliff hanger. We never fully know if the elder sibling listens to the parent's pleading and joins the party, and I think in that way it leaves us to reflect on where God, our parent, is pleading with us to join the party of abundant grace, and yet we are resistant, insisting that unless everyone at the party has earned the right to be there, we won't go.

Yet even in our stubbornness, God, through Christ, has modeled for us the ministry of reconciliation and entrusted us with this ministry as God's heavenly ambassadors.

There will no doubt be times when we take advantage of our graceful parent asking greedily for our share and squandering it like it was cheap, and there will be yet other times when we, like the elder sibling, don't even recognize the grace we are invited to experience because we are regarding others from a human, individualistic, pull yourself up by your bootstraps point of view.

When we cry out to God our parent and say, "God, this child of yours needs to be taught a lesson," God looks at us like the parent of the elder sibling and does not agree and say, "Yes, that child of mine needs to be taught a lesson," but God turns it around and says, "That sibling of yours is in need of love and grace. Be my ambassador of reconciliation."

And that is when we once again return to the promise of our baptism that we have been made one in Christ, and, once again, in the words of Paul from Second Corinthians, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

We are reconciled and made new once again. Our old greedy or stubborn selves die, and we can once again return to our work and call as ambassadors of reconciliation, bringing heavenly healing, wholeness, grace, and unity to a foreign world that needs to know these things.

Maybe you see yourself as the prodigal sibling, maybe you see yourself as the elder sibling. Whatever the case may be, our parent has thrown us a party of grace where we are reconciled to one another and invited to feast at God's table of mercy. Amen.