

## God's Reconciling Point of View

### 2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Strategic Theme: Becoming a Healing and Reconciling Church

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray. Holy God, you have redeemed all things in Jesus Christ. Now help us to listen to the Word you speak to us in holy Scripture and give us courage to commit to acting on this Good News by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

During the next four weeks, in line with our strategic plan, we will be talking about the strategic theme “to become a healing and reconciling church”—a church that makes peace in a world in which it is tough to come by peace. And so we encourage you, as you participate in this week's events, to prayerfully consider what role you are being called to play in the making of peace in your family... in the church... and in the world.

When our second daughter, Tonya, went to college, she went to a school that specialized in science and engineering. She has come from parents who were liberal-arts people, especially in music; at times in the family, there is a sense of disconnection between our points of view. Early on, we saw the possibility of what Tonya's call would be in life. When she was rocking on a little wooden horse rocking chair, the dowel came out of the head; she immediately reached down on the floor, as a two-year-old, looked at it, and put it back in the hole very carefully. We knew from that point on that she was destined to be an engineer.

When Tonya was graduating from Harvey Mudd College in Southern California, she participated in a senior project doing biomedical engineering. When we heard her verbal report and saw the team's exhibit, we didn't understand much of what was being said. But she had invited my second-older brother, Wes, to the event; he is a trained physicist. They talked for (it seemed) many, many minutes (if not hours) about her project—in total understanding with each other. Then, she exclaimed to her Uncle Wes: “Thanks for coming to hear my presentation. It's so good to talk with a relative who understands my work. My parents are very supportive, but frankly they don't have a clue.”

Differing points of view can sometimes leave us with a sense of isolation and aloneness, even in our families. What we see in this text is that God has shared with us a unique point of view in Jesus Christ; there is no other human point of view that is like it. When I have talked with leaders of political impact here in Washington, DC, over the past three years, the consistent message is sadness about the political climate in this city and around the country— becoming more aggressive, dissonant, and ugly. Winning often means giving-over to the meanness of the attack, and even working to undermine the trust of the public toward the opposition. Each party and each candidate has a unique and particular point of view that drives their desire to win the election; even if, in some cases, they have to do damage to the opposition to do it.

Differing points of view often fuel the tensions in places like Pakistan, Palestine, and Kenya. Democratic elections, as we often see, do not necessarily resolve the differences between warring groups. In Kenya, the ancient tribal wounds were reopened recently when President Kibaki, from the more dominant Kikuyu tribe, was accused of fixing his re-election and disregarding the interests of the lesser tribe, the Luos, from whom his opponent, Mr. Odinga, came from. In a country of 40 ancient tribes, it is difficult to find a common point of view for Kenya to gather around. And particularly under stress, it tends to fragment, as we've seen.

We know that it is differing points of view about who owns the land... who owns the property... that continue to fuel the tensions in Palestine—in the Holy Land—between Israeli Jews, Palestinian Muslims, and Christians. But everyone forgets that we wonder if anyone could own the land, the Holy Land, except for a holy God; and maybe there's God's point of view.

It is the old and hardened disagreement and points of view that we have seen recently divide Pakistan —contributing to the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and the stronghold mentality of the president. Strong, reinforced patterns of resistance, cycles of vengeance, from differing points of view, vendettas that pass back and forth like ping-pong balls. One hit triggers a harder hit; which, in a sense, triggers a more harsh hit; which mobilizes a culminating hit; which sometimes drives the enemy underground to plan a more devastating hit some time in the future —because difference leads to dissonance... which leads to destruction... which leads to destitution and despair.

We know that the leaders of the world continue to ask: “Is there no one, unifying point of view that can draw tribes and nations and peoples together? A point of view that brings honesty, openness, forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation?” You see, most religions of the world call us to make peace or to live in peace. But, as Paul understood from his own experience with Christ, and from watching the Corinthian people, multiple gods and multiple religions tended to reinforce between people the enmity of their differences. The gods of the Greeks and the Romans each had a point of view that looked— all too often—all too human. They, like their worshippers, showed points of view fueled by self-interest; by disdain; disinterest; vindictiveness; capriciousness; competitiveness; sexual desire; jealousy; and envy — all human points of view.

And so what did Paul do? He noticed that the gods expected strict observance of their points of view through rites and sacrifices. It was too bad, frankly, if the expectations of other gods was not in sync with the gods who were being worshiped by this group. If people did not keep strict obedience with a particular god's point of view, then it was said that those gods would take vengeance and rage upon them. The gods had a point of view that would run human appetites, sacrifices of food, and sexuality. For example, Dionysus, the god of wine and hedonistic life, had a point of view that promiscuity, drunkenness, and the undisciplined life was to be commended and practiced. Poseidon, the ruling god of Corinth, demanded human sacrifice to keep the seas calm and the merchant trade fluid. There were economic points of view that drove the reasons why gods did what they did.

Today there continue to be gods in our marketplace, from a more secular perspective, that drive our selfish human points of view. The gods of addiction that say: "Act on your desire. Why be disciplined? Do what you want, when you want to do it; give in to your hunger." The gods of money that say: "Buy what you want, when you want it; it doesn't make any difference if you go into debt." The gods of power that say: "Step on people. It doesn't make any difference if you have to hurt somebody on the way to the top. Get there any way you can." The gods of some of our families that say: "Give your children what they want, when they want it. Let them run your family. You don't really have the time to guide them and to nurture them. You should worship your kids and make them the center of your life."

In our highly-individualized culture, each of us today is drawn into the possibility that we can become our own gods and create our own religion: the concept of 'boutique religion,' where a person can take a computer and literally gain a following overnight, of persons on the internet —because they have a certain belief system that will draw others to their point of view.

We demand that those who would be our friends must agree with us. We seek to relate to only those who are like us. In order to get our way, we often dominate, manipulate, coerce, or intimidate. We advocate for our own point of view, even if we have to somehow disdain the opposition. These lesser gods— whether they be ancient or contemporary— all have points of view. And those points of view put human beings at the center of who is defining reality. But there is only one faith that reveals a point of view of a God who makes peace by sacrificing his own life for human beings.

Occasionally, in the popular culture, there is a recognition that we are searching for such a redemptive God, someone who would bring our points of view to one common and unifying point of view. This desire is sometimes seen in our advertising, as in a recent American Express ad showing tennis great John McEnroe in a surprisingly temperate state after he is tempted to rant against the gods of capricious credit card accounts. As you may remember, McEnroe is known for his tantrum-prone past. He is remembered for his volatile reactions against umpires of the tennis court; he would let his contrarian point of view erupt when all did not go his way. Inevitably, in sports, there will be differing points of view between umpires and players; no doubt about it. On some occasions, to demonstrate his very strong disagreement with the umpire's point of view, McEnroe would throw his racket or break it, in protest against the judge's call. His most famous outburst was in 1981 at Wimbledon, when he exploded on a call by the umpire and shouted, "You can't be serious!" and later, in the press, called that particular umpire "the pits of the world."

In this advertisement, McEnroe, according to American Express' gospel, is so moved by the gracious response of American Express' dispute resolution service that he travels all the way around the world to visit a German chair umpire whom he berated in the 1985 U.S. Open. When the umpire opens his front door, McEnroe immediately offers his regrets for disputing the call, hugs him, and says, "You're not evil."

What is the undercurrent value system? There must be a way... there must be a point of view... that reconciles people who have done damage and hurt to each other. The Apostle Paul knows, as he writes to the Christians of Corinth, that we have been formed, from our pasts, by different gods and different points of view. He reduces all of these various religious perspectives and worships of gods to one point of view, and he uses this Greek phrase, *kata sarka*: "according to the flesh;" or, as the New Revised Standard Version puts it, "from a human point of view."

Even Paul himself admits (confesses) that he actually once regarded Jesus from a human point of view. But we know, when he was walking on the road to Damascus, that Jesus—the resurrected Christ— stopped him on the road, called him by name, and asked him why he was so upset: "Saul, why are you kicking against the goads?" Before Paul met the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus and saw his point of view, he was the one standing there near the execution of Stephen and holding the coats of the ones who threw the stones— supporting their commitment to get rid of Christians, throw them in prison and abuse them. Because Paul believed, from his point of view, that they were doing damage to God.

But when Jesus met him face-to-face... when Jesus called him by name... when Jesus asked him the question of what was really driving him, he was transformed —because he saw life from God's point of view. And then Paul goes on to say to the people who are caught in pantheism, an environment of multiple gods: Jesus, the Christ, has died for all. He died so we would not be driven to live for ourselves—controlled by our limited points of view— and we should live for Christ, who died for us and was raised from the dead for us. Jesus Christ, by God's power, makes us new creations. That's God's point of view.

This is a core value of the proclamation of the Gospel that we want to proclaim in this place and around us, as we go out into the world: in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. In Christ, God convinces us to take his point of view. Our own points of view... our accusing or condemning human points of view... began, according to Scripture, at the beginning, in creation, when we decided (because of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil) to partake of that tree as our own. We would make our own decisions about what was right and wrong. We would lean into the dictates of our own minds and our own hearts; and we would no longer look at life from God's point of view. In that Garden of Eden, it says that we were separated from God; we were separated from one another, we were separated from ourselves; and we were separated from the heart of creation to treat it in good ways. We condemn ourselves, and we condemn one another, because we have taken our own point of view. There is no way to human peace and reconciliation when every individual and tribe has their own point of view; we have no way to gain common ground and unity. But Jesus is the way, Jesus is the truth, and Jesus is the life. Jesus brings the point of view that can bring us together.

In Christ, we hear what God has done for us—what we cannot do for ourselves: when we could not find a way to be reconciled with God, God took the initiative to come to us and be reconciled to us. God makes the reconciliation happen because we can't. And when we grasp that, from God's point of view, we quit working so hard to make it happen and simply accept Jesus as a gift of grace that will transform our lives.

Paul goes one step further. Through Christ, we have something to do: we are given the privilege of sharing this wonderful gift with others; that is, God's point of view and how God loves us in Christ. We are given the ministry of reconciliation: to tell our children...

our neighbors and our colleagues... and those around us in the culture... that there is only one way to reconciliation and making peace—it is through Jesus, the Christ—crucified and risen.

Paul uses this word “reconcile” five times in two sentences; he's trying to get our attention. The word paints a picture of how one person exchanges their life for another; how one person pays the debt of another; how one person settles the unpaid accounts of another; how one person transfers their wealth for another; how one person goes to prison for another; how one person dies for another. God does that for us. And when we catch that point of view, we cannot help but be overwhelmed that there is no other point of view... in the entire universe... like it.

Jesus takes our place. Jesus pays our debts. Jesus suffers for us. Jesus dies for us. Jesus is raised to new life for us. And we are reconciled to God because of what Jesus has done in his life. Jesus replaces our little and denigrating points of view with his huge, redemptive understanding of the universe. For as we may say: “He will never change,” Jesus will say: “I can change him.” For as we may say: “She is beyond hope,” Jesus will say: “I have hope for her.” For as we may say: “God doesn't really care,” Jesus says: “I care, and I am willing to lay down my life to show you I care.” For as we may say: “This marriage is dead,” Jesus says: “I am the resurrection, the life, and I can make all things new.” For as we may say: “There is no way to transform the ancient tribalism of Kenya; or resolve the holy wars in Jerusalem; or heal the festering wounds of Pakistan,” Jesus says: “I have come that they might have abundant, just, gracious, and peaceful life.”

Today we ordain and install officers of this church. As leaders called by God, we are under the obligation of Christ's Spirit to let go of our limited and small understandings from our human perspectives and begin to take on the viewpoint of Jesus... and to lead from God's viewpoint. Jesus is our lens through which we should see and look at the church and all of its concerns. We should see the building and its needs through the life and eyes of Jesus. We should see the budget and its needs through the life and eyes of Jesus. We should see the congregation and its needs through the life and eyes of Jesus. We should see the patterns of worship and preaching and whatever we do through the life... and eyes... and listening to the words... of Jesus.

When we look at our priorities in ministry, we are called to give up our personal points of view and prayerfully take on God's point of view in Christ. That is the call of our leadership – elders, deacons, and trustees. So let us, today, affirm that commandment, not only as leaders, but as a congregation: that we will give up our limited views and we will take on the point of view of God and Jesus Christ. So let us see what God sees: that you and I are sinners; that we have limitations; that we don't understand everything that's happening; we are dying; but that Jesus has died for us... and Jesus has been raised from the dead for us. That is the point. There is only one point of view that will save us and save our world: God is in Jesus Christ reconciling the world to himself. Be reconciled to God.

Let us pray. Gracious and merciful God, help us to become your ambassadors. Teach us your point of view in Jesus. Move us to reconcile with you, and empower us to be ministers of reconciliation among those close to us and those around us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.