

Everything Old Has Passed Away
Dr. D. William McIvor
February 17, 2010 — Ash Wednesday
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Evening Lesson

I was reading recently about Martin Luther and the day he was ordained as a priest and for the first time consecrated the Mass. Even today this is a momentous time in a man's life and also for his family and community. But in Luther's day, ordination and a priest's first Mass were a highly public spectacle, a kind of nuptial, graduation party, and debutante ball all wrapped into one. There were gala feasts and happy crowds of well-wishers, family, and friends.

But biographers tell us that Luther was more nervous than a groom at his wedding and at the high moment of the Mass, in the Great Prayer consecrating the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, he became paralyzed in panic and fear.

It lasted but a few moments and the priest assisting him at the high altar helped him get past it. Probably many in the crowded church didn't even notice. But Luther later described what he felt when he started into the prayer: "I was utterly stupefied and terror-struck. I thought to myself, 'With what tongue shall I address such Majesty? ... I am dust and ashes and I am speaking to the living, eternal, and true God!'"¹

I do remember the moment when I was ordained but I do not remember when I first celebrated the sacrament of Lord's Supper. How ironic is it that within the Protestant tradition which in many ways began with Martin Luther, the consecration of the sacrament doesn't feel so momentous? But despite that, whether we are clergy or laity, when do we feel what Luther felt? Or at least something akin to it? When are we so overcome by the majesty of God that we are at least for a moment stupefied and terror-struck? When do we feel that before God we are but dust and ashes? Maybe tonight.

My text this evening is from the apostle Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. It is a passage that perhaps puts Lent in context. For Lent begins with dust and ashes and ends with victory over death in the empty tomb on Easter morning. In other words, Lent is the story of reconciliation between the eternal God and frail creatures like you and me, terror-struck to even speak God's name. Let's read it in 2 Corinthians 5.

2 Corinthians 5.17-6.2 (NRSV)

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 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. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 27.

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”²

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

Now is the reconciling time

This text begins with Paul saying a new creation happened in Christ and he concluded by saying now is the day of salvation. In other words, the new creation is a past event and it has present day implications. Because of what happened in the past we must live now to bring about reconciliation.

What is reconciliation? It can be defined simply as “alongsidedness.”³ That awkwardly translates a Greek word (παράκλησεως) that is typically translated into English as *console* or *consolation*. Sometimes it refers to the work of the Holy Spirit but it can also refer to how Christians can care for each other.⁴ I think we will get a better feel for this word if I read two key verses from earlier in 2 Corinthians where it is used repeatedly. But instead of reading *console* I’ll substitute *alongsidedness*.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all *alongsidedness*, who *comes alongside* us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to *come alongside* of those who are in any affliction with the *alongsidedness* with which we ourselves are *come alongside of* by God.” (2 Corinthians 1.3-4)

That’s reconciliation. It is coming alongside those who are hurting, putting a loving arm around their shoulders, and showing them that all will be well. In Jesus Christ, God came alongside us. That’s the past. Now in the present we must come alongside others in Christ’s name. Let’s think about what that looks like.

Paul wrote, “All this is from God.” That is, in the first creation, God and God alone created. Likewise in the second creation, God and God alone is at work. God is doing what neither you nor I nor anyone can do. God is reconciling the irreconcilable. For the truth is what Luther experienced — the painful truth we don’t like to admit — that on its own humanity is in perpetual mutiny against God. This is not just about doing bad things. It is about being bad. The human condition is a sinful condition. We are but dust and ashes. But the happy truth is that God has already overcome this. Jesus Christ came alongside us and reconciled us to God.

Paul described this when he said that Christ was “made to be sin.” Isn’t that an amazing statement? Jesus Christ, God incarnate, the One without sin, was made to be sin. However we

² Isaiah 49.8-9b: Thus says the LORD: In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, “Come out,” to those who are in darkness, “Show yourselves.”

³ Earl F. Palmer, *Alive from the Center* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982) 70-71.

⁴ Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. V (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967) 823. “... since all the other terms refer to the interrelations of Christians, ... the whole list has the unity of the congregation as its goal, [and] what is meant is surely the comfort that one brother (sic) gives another through the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost. This mutual work of consolation is one of the basic features of the community life of primitive Christianity. It makes the Christian fellowship of suffering into a fellowship of consolation. All consolations on the part of Christians have their model and source in the other world. Above all earth earthly comforters stands the one heavenly comforter who effects all genuine comfort on earth.”

define what separates us from God or from each other or even from our true, best selves, Christ became that. He became the hurt that separates lovers. He became the fear and hatred that separate races. He became the evil that in the soul's bitter alchemy bubbles up as pride, greed, and lust. Christ became sin and in his becoming sin, we became righteous.⁵ Christ reconciled what is naturally not together and we are now called to be ambassadors of this reconciliation.

But there is a cost. It comes about because we relate to the world in terms of a great given. The given is that Christ has already reconciled the world and we who know Jesus as Savior and Lord have entered into the continuing discovery of this reconciliation. But we don't always live as reconciled people and the world never acknowledges God's reconciliation. So in a world so marked by dust and ashes, there is a price to pay for being ambassadors of all things becoming new in Christ.

This means reconciliation is not naiveté or the feeling that we'll all get along if we're just nice. Real reconciliation is the hard, painful work of bringing people together who don't want to be together. That always demands a price. If we think otherwise, we have misunderstood Paul. Reconciliation between God and humanity demanded of Christ the price of the cross. If we want to be followers of Christ, then we must pay a price too. It's far easier to pretend that no one needs reconciling or to despair at how impossible it is. But faith in Christ demands we neither pretend nor despair. Faith demands the price of reconciliation. It means that our lives will, indeed must, change.

I was reminded of this a few weeks ago when Glenna Waller, the president of Little Children of the Philippines, was here. Consider the price paid by our mission team that went to the Philippines in 2008. It may not be what you think. Yes, it cost a lot to send 11 students and 9 adults to the Philippines. It was huge effort on the part of many people to raise more than \$45,000. The money got the team to the Philippines and they worked hard in a variety of ways to help Little Children's ministry. They touched the lives of young people and families who, compared to our standards, live in poverty. But what was the price for this and was it worth it?

After all, their efforts benefitted but didn't forever change the poverty-stricken lives they saw. Poverty in Philippines was not solved because our mission team was there nor was poverty ended in Dumaguete City or even in the families whose lives were touched. In tangible terms the amount of good done was very little when compared to the scale of economic need. In fact, if we are brutally truthful, it might have done more good to send \$45,000 to that community for direct distribution through some trustworthy person. If we had done that, all the money would have gone to people who really need it rather than a big portion going to Japan Airlines or Philippines Air as well as feeding and housing our own mission team.

So what was the real cost and was it worth it? The real cost was being ambassadors of reconciliation to reconcile what is irreconcilable. The real cost was for a few days to literally come alongside others who naturally are unreconciled to us because of nationality and race and language and culture and economic status. The real cost was to embody the beginnings of love and hope and a different way of living.

The real cost wasn't money. The real cost was that everyone who went from PCIS, if they had their eyes and hearts open at all, didn't come back the same as they went. They came alongside

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians, New Century Bible* (London: Oliphants, 1971) 211. "Paul has chosen this exceptional wording in order to emphasize the 'sweet exchange' whereby sinners are given a righteous status before God through the righteous one who absorbed their sin (and its judgment) in himself."

human brothers and sisters who are living in conditions unimaginable to us. Such an experience changes us. The members of that mission team won't think the same way again or pray the same way or believe the same way. They may not even vote the same way, or go to school the same way, or do their jobs the same way because they were and continue to be reconciled and reconcilers.

Ultimately the real cost is the lingering uneasiness they feel having come back to affluence while knowing that those with whom they were reconciled are still living in very impoverished circumstances. And they'll feel that uneasiness every time they seek to be ambassadors of reconciliation. In other words, when we know that we are reconciled with God and when we have taken up the hard work to share with others that reconciliation, we know that things are still not what God wants them to be. Dust and ashes are still too much with us and in us and it breaks our hearts.

That's why we come this Ash Wednesday way, because our hearts are broken. But tonight is not the end. It is the beginning. In Jesus Christ, God came alongside us. We *are* reconciled to God and Jesus still walks with us today. So because in Christ everything old has passed away, we go on from here affirming what Paul wrote. "Now is the day of salvation." Despite the dust and ashes, we more and more place our trust in the One who brought to our dusty world the very salvation of God.⁶

⁶ David L. Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 19.