

¹⁸And all these things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. ¹⁹That is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. And he has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, inasmuch as God is making an appeal through us. We urge you, on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹God made him, who did not know sin, to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

Last week, we rejoiced in the theme “Christ for us”, that Jesus came to bring peace with God to sinners. This week, we marvel that the same Savior who redeemed us now works through us. But if God could accomplish all the work of salvation on his own, and we know he certainly can, why does he choose to work through sinners like us? Paul answers this in his second letter to the Corinthian church, a church that knew its sin well and also knew God's grace even better.

Here, in this section, we see the heart of the gospel on display: “That is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” Reconciliation means a restoration of some relationship that's been broken. And we know that every relationship that's broken is broken by sin, either some sin that caused anger and frustration or the sin of apathy toward a relationship, where it just fizzles out. We know our perfect relationship with God was broken by Adam and Eve, though we would be ignorant to not mention that we too commit sin after sin.

But God does not count sin against us because, as Paul says so eloquently here, “God made him, who did not know sin, to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” Jesus took our sin upon himself in his perfect life and innocent death, and in exchange he gave us his righteousness. That means this is all God's work. As we read: “All these things are from God.”

As we talked about last week, this has been the bedrock for confessional Lutheranism for the last five centuries and has been the focal point of our synod since its inception 175 years ago. From 1,200 congregations to missions in 45 countries to an extensive ministerial education system that prepares pastors and Lutheran school teachers, everything we do centers on proclaiming the reconciliation that is already finished in Christ. Before we can serve, we must be served. Before we can speak, we must listen and take to heart. Before Christ works through us, he first must work for us.

We have been given this gospel of reconciliation with God. But before we can share it with others, we must first apply it to ourselves. Christ came for you and me. His sacrifice paid for our sins to set us free. This is not just some universal truth, like a blanket pardon. This is

personal. Jesus didn't just die for the world at the cross. He died for you. And if his death would have only saved you, he still would have done it. That means you are right with God, and there should be no doubts about that.

But Paul's focus here is not just that we are right with God. He goes a step further: "[God] gave us the ministry of reconciliation." Understand, God does not need us. He could do all the work of salvation on his own. He could deliver his message to the world even more efficiently that we can. But he chooses to need us. He entrusts this message of reconciliation to us, miserable sinners.

This makes us "ambassadors for Christ." But what is an ambassador? Ambassadors don't speak their own message or by their own authority. They are given the message to convey by the one they are sent by and go with that leader's authority. That means an ambassador must be trusted and competent to serve in his role. But are we competent? Are we trustworthy with God's message? I think before we answer those questions, we need to answer a different question: Do we hold God's word in the highest regard in our own lives? That matters, because if we don't value God's word to the fullest in our own lives, how can we possibly be trusted to bring it into the lives of others without adding to or subtracting from it? And the answer to that question is that each and every time we sin we don't take care of God's word. Whether it was a moment of weakness or slow and meditated disobedience, we let our own will get in the way of God's will. Can he trust us to care for his word? No. Does he see us as fully competent to accomplish his goals? No. Yet, astonishingly, as Paul tells us, God makes his appeal through us.

But doesn't this follow in line with the way God treats us? We did not deserve his love and salvation, yet in mercy, he showed it to us anyway. Likewise, we do not deserve to carry the message of sins forgiven to the world around us. But God sends us anyway. And he can send us and be confident that the work will get done, because it's really not us doing the work. It is Christ working through us.

What an honor! How could God possibly choose us? But he does! That's what we are as a congregation. We are Christ's ambassadors. We bring his invitation to our community. We get to show people that they have been reconciled to God in Jesus. How humbling! And we not only get to do that in our local ministry here. We also take part in this ministry of reconciliation by working arm-in-arm with the other churches in our church body. A portion of our offerings here go to start missions all over our country and world. They help fund our worker-training schools, preparing pastors to deliver the message of reconciliation from pulpits and teachers to their little lambs in the classroom.

But our contribution to "Christ through us" doesn't stop with money. Over the years, our joint ministry here at St. Mark and Holy Cross has encouraged and sent young people to consider and study for public ministry. I've met a son of Holy Cross who's a retired pastor in

the Twin Cities area. We have retired called workers who sit in our pews every Sunday. We have a young lady in college who is studying to be a Lutheran school teacher right now and a few of our younger ones who are strongly considering the teaching and preaching ministry.

And you know what? If we have a bunch of young people put themselves forward to be candidates for ministry, it will have a cost to our church. When I was in Ohio, they had quite a few active young people who were considering public ministry, a calling that would take these young leaders away from their church. There was quite a stir in the council meeting when that was brought up. But then the head elder of the church spoke up: “What greater gift could we give to our church body than four or five workers for God’s harvest fields? And God will take care of us.”

I think back to the little WELS church I grew up in in western Illinois. We worshiped sixty on a good Sunday. The church struggled to make its budget. But so many in the church were proud that they got to support the synod by encouraging their young people to consider service. What a privilege it is when a person can point to you and say, “You were a big encourager for ministry. God used you to foster this desire in me.” This is yet another way that Christ works through you to bring the gospel to others.

But you know you have a bigger ministry role than supporting those who serve on your behalf, don’t you? Not every believer has been called by God through a church to serve in public ministry, but every believer has been called by God to serve him in their homes, workplaces, and communities. Every diaper that is changed, every meal that’s prepared, every ounce of sweat that’s spilled – it’s Christ working through his reconciled people to care for the needs of others. You are Christ’s representatives wherever you go and whoever you interact with. And when the opportunity arises, you become witnesses for Jesus when you not only live a life reconciled to God, but you tell others about their reconciliation at the cross and empty tomb as well. Because God could have written his gospel in the sky. He could have written it on natural human hearts, like he does with his law. But he doesn’t. He spread his message to us through people, then he calls us to bring his message to others. We preach the message of God’s grace, understanding that our ability to share it is also God’s grace.

Our salvation is sure: “Christ for us.” Our mission is clear: “Christ through us.” And next week, we will consider where our comfort and strength come from as we go and serve in God’s grace: “Christ with us.” But here’s one final piece of encouragement: God’s reconciliation did not stop at you. It flows through you. You are his ambassador. You are part of his ongoing kingdom work. Yes, it’s a 175-year-old story for our church body, but this work existed long before WELS was founded and will exist even if our church body disappears. Because Christ’s march to win souls will never end, until his kingdom is full and the work is done. Amen.