

2 Corinthians 5

16 So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him now.

17 So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!

18 All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. 19 In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation.

20 So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" 21 God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God.

Psalms 1

The truly happy person

doesn't follow wicked advice,
doesn't stand on the road of sinners,
and doesn't sit with the disrespectful.

2 Instead of doing those things,
these persons love the Lord's Instruction,
and they recite God's Instruction day and night!

3 They are like a tree replanted by streams of water,
which bears fruit at just the right time
and whose leaves don't fade.
Whatever they do succeeds.

4 That's not true for the wicked!
They are like dust that the wind blows away.

5 And that's why the wicked will have no standing in the court of justice—
neither will sinners
in the assembly of the righteous.

6 The Lord is intimately acquainted
with the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked is destroyed.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours,
yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion
is to look out to the earth,
yours are the feet by which Jesus is to go about doing good
and yours are the hands by which Christ is to bless us now.

These words, from the writings of St. Teresa of Avila, help to highlight our identities the very hands and feet of Jesus's body in the world. With the words of Paul from 2nd Corinthians in mind, it seems that St. Teresa describes to us how we might serve as Christ's ambassadors.

We've talked round and round about creation and reCreation the past four weeks, so the first part of this passage should sound somewhat familiar. "If anyone is in Christ," says Paul, "that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have

arrived!" In other words, reCreation is at work. Our entire series of creation and reCreation is built upon this very theological foundation: in Christ, the old world defined by sin is dying, and the new world defined by grace, the Kingdom of God, is coming into life. Most importantly, at God's invitation, we are a part of that new creation, so along with the new life that we receive, the stuff that's tied to sin in us is dying away. We're becoming Jesus's ambassadors more and more each day.

An ambassador, simply put, is someone who serves as the representative of a government to another country. Considering that we're to be Christ's ambassadors, this means that our role in the world isn't to serve our own selfish desires or personal preferences, but instead to represent God and God's will for this new creation. This also means that, if we're ambassadors, we're not citizens of the place in which we live, at least not primarily! Our first citizenship is in

the kingdom of God, over against any nation or region in which we otherwise live.

Now that just may be the most subversive theological claim that Scripture makes on our lives. If you're a Christian and you're born in the United States or in North Korea, your first duty is not to the flag or the constitution or a supreme leader, but to God and God's Kingdom. Our job, as Christ's ambassadors, is to represent this new creation, the new work that God's doing in the world, and try to convince the lands in which we live that, well, they owe their allegiance to somebody else first. That there's a better kingdom, a more virtuous rule, a more benevolent government, than we could ever find in our human realms or create on our own.

And that's where this all just gets messy, you know? No matter the scriptural warrant, not matter the Biblical quotes, no matter the historical evidence, to suggest that people's

allegiance should not first be to the flag or the nation of their birth or citizenship is almost always an invitation for confrontation. Most Christians, perhaps many of us, think that there's no problem with absolute allegiance to Christ **and** absolute allegiance to our country. And somewhere, ringing in the back of our heads, we should hear the words of Jesus: You cannot serve two masters. Or perhaps some other words of Jesus. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's. We cannot have two absolute allegiances. It's simply not possible.

Yet, though our allegiance as ambassadors belongs to Jesus and that reign of mercy, we're still called to love the places in which we live. Of course, the best ambassadors truly care for the countries that they live in and the people that they live with. We're not called to seek the destruction of any nation, the U.S. or otherwise, but we are called to foster their reCreation as ambassadors from their Creator.

We're called to help change them in ways that align them with God's rule, to foster their transformation in ways that reflect the beauty of God's eternal kingdom here in our place and time. As ambassadors for Christ, our allegiance belongs to God's Kingdom, but our work belongs in the places where our feet walk, where our hands work, where our minds reflect, where our bodies rest.

On my mother-in-law's refrigerator, there's a quote from Max Lucado: "God loves you just the way you are, but God refuses to leave you that way. God wants you to be just like Jesus." As ambassadors for Christ, we're called to have the same mindset when we look at our communities. We're called to love our communities, our states, our countries, our entire world, but we're called to love them in a way that changes them. As Christians, we're not supposed to love everything about our country. How can we love, for instance, that our country incarcerates the

highest number of total prisoners in the world, 500,000 more than China, the next highest country, even though our population is $\frac{1}{4}$ their size? Yet, we're called to love our country in ways that foster change, that bring justice to people who are imprisoned for petty crimes, who are wrongly convicted, or who are held without sentence.

We're supposed to love our town of Radford and the entire New River Valley. But, with our conversation around refugees, we're not supposed to love the fear-mongering, the overt prejudice against Muslims, or threats of violence that came out in those conversations. Instead, we're supposed to love the NRV in ways that shapes this place to look more like God's Kingdom, in ways that make safe spaces for everyone in need, in ways that replace fear and prejudice with hospitality and celebrating diversity.

The new has come, Paul says, and so too the old is going away. One of my New Testament professors used to

get all worked up about this passage, because the Greek terminology here doesn't indicate a final state of being. The old isn't completely gone, nor is the new completely here. Instead, it's an active and ongoing process, where the old is going away and the new is taking root deep within us. Perhaps it's best to say that we're becoming ambassadors for Christ, that as the old goes away, the newness that is taking hold within us is this identity as ambassadors, this conviction that our ultimate allegiance isn't to a flag made of cloth or a country supported by human ideals, but to the Kingdom of Heaven and to the God who is making all things new.

Paul says that, as ambassadors, they're negotiating with the world on Christ's behalf. In other words, as ambassadors we're called to be vocal advocates for God's Kingdom and the ways of justice embedded within the DNA God gave to this new creation. As I've learned from leaders

in the #decolonizelutheranism movement, even advocates aren't always enough, because advocates typically only talk. As ambassadors we're called to be co-conspirators with Christ. We're meant to conspire for change, using both our words to help convince people of God's good will for the world, but also using our actions to reveal in tangible ways what the Kingdom of God is all about.

That's why we won't stop confronting issues of white privilege and racial discrimination against minorities, not because I like beating up on myself as a white dude, but because God's Kingdom is meant to be a place of true equality, of true healing, of true love for and appreciation of people not like us. That's why we won't stop our work to help refugees resettle here in the New River Valley, because God's clear preference throughout scripture is to show hospitality to those in need. That's why next week we'll put together personal care kits to help people affected by

Hurricane Hermine this weekend, by the recent earthquakes in Italy, or by the floods in Louisiana and WV. Ambassadors for Christ must be coconspirators with people of color working for justice, with refugees seeking safety, with disaster victims across the globe, with anyone and everyone who needs a sign of God's new work in the world.

Following in the witness of St. Teresa, to be an ambassador is to speak and live with this truth at the core of our lives:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours,
yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion
is to look out to the earth,
yours are the feet by which Jesus is to go about doing good
and yours are the hands by which Christ is to bless the world.

On any other day, the sermon would end here, but I think it's important to note that today is the second Sunday of my third year here at CLC. Y'all called me and I began serving you on September 1st of 2014. When we started

ministry together, we weren't quite sure of what the possibilities of the future looked like for CLC. We hoped that there was new life for us, that the old was going away and that God's newness was becoming alive in our midst, but with a small community, who knew what that meant?

Now, however, we've got a clear sense of what is possible. We've grown from a community of fifteen people regularly attending one event on Sundays to a group that has as many as seventy people active in the life of the church through events on most every day of the week. We've expanded our ministries to include college students, people with disabilities, artists, youth and young adults, people who love yoga, and a host of others in our community. In other words, we're becoming Christ's ambassadors to each one of these groups in the New River Valley.

The reCreation isn't done here, however. We must continue to ask whether we're being the hands and feet that Christ's needs active in the NRV. That's what this entire series has been about, not just a theoretical conversation about creativity, but a penetrating exploration of what we at CLC can become if we truly take hold of this identity as Christ's ambassadors, if we truly want to live the life God makes possible for us. This takes work. This takes sacrifice. And I believe, in the very depth of my heart, that if every one of us decides to invest in the reCreation not just of CLC, but of the NRV, then there's a bright future of ministry here.

So today, two years in this together, I think it's time for us each to take the next step. For our future, and the future of ministry here in the NRV, we need to continue this growth pattern. I'm so thankful for the ways that you serve as Christ's ambassadors already because I see the difference that it's made. There are people who may never enter this

church on Sunday mornings who now know Jesus because of the work we're doing at RU and NRCC and at Pub Theology and at Across the Spectrum and at the Rough Draught Coffee House, and which is why I'm asking you to take the risk of trying something new, of inviting others to come be a part of our life together here, of involving yourselves deeper into the ways that God's Spirit has brought new life to our community. We can take the momentum that we have now and grow forward into God's Kingdom together, but only insofar as we commit to being the hands and feet of God in this place that work to bless the world in which we live. Amen.