

Crossing the Chasm

2 Corinthians 5:16-20

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Lent 4

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. 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. (NRSV)

I

A friend of mine was recently asked to speak at a major denominational meeting. For his talk, he chose a topic he was passionate about. It was a topic he knew really, really well because he had been thinking about it for at least 10 years. So when he sat down to write his speech, the words flowed out of him like water from a fountain. His fingers flew across the keyboard. His mind was engaged. His heart was pumping with excitement.

What are you passionate about? What makes your eyes gleam? Your nostrils flare? Your heart pound with passion?

II

Paul was passionate about reconciliation. I imagine while writing this passage he paced back and forth across the floor energetically, the synapses of his brain sparkling as he chose the punchiest words to express his ideas.

Paul proposes that Christianity is about reconciliation between enemies. Period. Our big, overarching “sin” is that we were once enemies of God, nothing more, nothing less. God’s salvation lies precisely in creating peace between enemies, nothing more, nothing less. Loving enemies is not an optional ingredient of the Christian gospel. Loving enemies is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

III

Why was Paul passionate about reconciliation between enemies? Because of his own personal experience. Plainly put, Paul himself was once a virulent enemy of God, but through the extraordinary power of love, was turned into a new man.

You can find the story in Acts 7, 8, and 9. Paul, then a young man named Saul, was a good person. Indeed, he considered himself a righteous and holy man who believed he was doing God's will. He had received the best religious training available. He knew his "Bible" so well that he could quote long passages from memory. He attended religious services every week. He followed all religious requirements to the last detail. The man was a paragon of religious and moral perfection. Convinced he was the right hand of God, he got involved in the excommunication business. He went from house to house looking for heretics, and when he found them, dragged them off to prison.

The story of Saul reminds us that people who seem righteous, who are convinced they know what God wants, and who brashly believe themselves to be God's instruments, may actually be very far from God.

One day on his way to a new round of excommunications, Saul was overwhelmed by heavenly light, knocked off his high horse, and temporarily blinded. It was then that Saul discovered he was actually an enemy of God and needed to change his ways.

We know the Damascus Road story well, but we sometimes skip over the second part of the story. Yes, the mesmerizing encounter with Christ out on the road was decisive, but Saul also needed to meet an flesh and blood ambassador of Christ's love. If Saul was going to experience the full love and forgiveness of Christ, he had to experience it not just from Christ but also through another human being. And so Christ enlisted the ambassadorial services of Ananias.

As far as we know, Ananias was just was an ordinary, run-of-the-mill disciple of Christ. He wasn't an outstanding preacher or teacher. He wasn't a prominent leader in the church. He wasn't well-educated. He wasn't anything great or special.

Immediately after Christ knocked Saul off his self-righteous horse, Christ paid a visit to Ananias. "Ananias," he said, "I want you to walk over to your friend Judas' house on

Straight Street. A young man named Saul is there. Go lay your hands on him and pray for him.”

“What!?” replied Ananias. “Saul? I’ve heard about that rascal. He’s evil! He’s our enemy! He’s been throwing us Christians into prison!”

“Yes,” said Christ, “that’s exactly the man I mean. I’ve chosen Saul, my enemy and your enemy, to become a leader in the church. Now go and demonstrate my love to him!”

So Ananias went. When he arrived, he laid his hands on this dangerous enemy and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me so you may see and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

IV

Let’s linger there for a moment. Can you imagine what courage it took for Ananias to greet Saul as a “brother,” and to lay his hands on muscles that had thrown other Christians in jail? Saul was a murderer! From the viewpoint of every Christian then alive in the world, Saul was an evil man. And now he was a “brother”?

What happens to Ananias amounts to another conversion experience. Ananias was already a follower of Jesus who accepted the gospel as he understood it. But that wasn’t enough. Now Christ asked Ananias to love his arch-enemy, an act so odd, so counter-intuitive, so radical, that we could call it a second conversion. The story implies that when Ananias first became a Christian, he did not yet perceive that the gospel was about loving enemies. Only now does Ananias and the rest of the Christian church come to understand that the heart of the good news is concrete love for enemies.

Something similar happens to Saul. This act of mercy, initiated by Christ and expressed by Ananias, affected Saul so profoundly that he took on a new name and a new identity. Not Saul but Paul. Not Christ hater but Christ follower. Not enemy of the church but member of the church. What happened between Ananias and Saul in Damascus shook both men at the foundations of their lives. It was a paradigm shift that set their feet in an unexpected direction.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians many years later, it was likely this formative incident that he had in mind. It was this incident that made him so passionate about the ministry of reconciliation. It was this event which convinced him that reconciliation is the heart of the gospel. It inspired him, enthralled him, captivated him.

V

The story of Ananias and Paul might motivate us to ponder reconciliation in our own lives. To that end, here are three questions we might consider.

- What act of reconciliation have I witnessed?
- When did an enemy reach out to me?
- What would make me passionate about crossing the chasm between enemies?