

*<sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup>that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup>We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

### **God's Work of Reconciliation**

- 1) The Message- The World to God Through Christ**
- 2) The Ministry- Christ's Appeal Through Us**

Today marks the main celebration day across our synod of the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. If we traveled back 175 years to 1850 at Salem Landmark Church on the Northwest side of Milwaukee, (only a few miles from where I grew up,) we'd find three Lutheran pastors meeting to form a synod, the Greek word for "walking together." They would be walking together in order to spread the gospel!

From those humble beginnings, God has graciously grown a synod that today has 340,000 members among 1,200 congregations across the United States, with world missions in 45 countries, and plans to start 100 missions over the next 10 years. Together these congregations also operate a Christ-centered school system of over 600 Lutheran pre-schools, grade schools, high schools, and a college and seminary of ministry training.

Yet as we sang in the hymn and proclaimed last week, "Not unto us, but to your name be praise, O Lord." We cannot take credit for any of it because God is the one who planted this tiny mustard seed and made it grow. What we can do is give our thanks and praise to God for the privilege to share in both the blessings of his kingdom and the ministry efforts of our church body.

Like the Apostle Paul says in our text. "**All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.**" From that verse we take the two main components of *God's Work of Reconciliation*. First, **1)** the message of reconciliation- that God reconciled us and really the whole world to himself through Christ, and second, **2)** the ministry of reconciliation- that God is administering the message through us. He's making his appeal to others through us. That's where the synod's anniversary theme comes from, "**CHRIST THROUGH US.**"

First the message of reconciliation is quite extraordinary, even unbelievable by human standards. The message says that God, without any prompting from us, without any reason in us, aside from our desperately deplorable condition, took it upon himself to reconcile us to himself. He looked at people who were objectively guilty and far-astay from him, and he decided to act to bring them back. We heard it last week. "**While we were still sinners, Christ died for us... While we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.**" (Romans 5:7,10) and we now hear it again this week. **God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ. (2 Cor 5:19)**

That term *reconcile* was originally kind of a banking and trade term. You would make a change between two things, you'd exchange one kind of money for another, like a foreign one for the local one you needed. And eventually it came to be used in relationships. There's an exchange of hostility for a friendly relationship. There's a restoring of peace that has been effected, like a husband and wife being reconciled to each other after trouble in the marriage.

We realize how difficult the idea of reconciliation can be. Have you ever been in a fight or a disagreement with someone, maybe in a friendship, or a marriage, and you wind up just dead set against each other. Usually with two sinful people there's enough blame to go around on both sides, but even then, it's hard to think about acknowledging guilt and laying down the bones you have in order to reconcile.

Imagine what it would look like from the side of God when he is totally blameless in every respect, and people are totally guilty, dead to rights, digging their own graves over and over to the millionth degree. And instead of unleashing his righteous wrath, instead he goes through all the work, he makes all the sacrifices, he lays himself down in order to change a world of sinners from being his enemies to his friends.

Think about that in banking terms again. Right now you've got approximately 8 billion people that live on planet earth. If you think about all the people that have ever lived in the world's history of approximately 6 to 10 thousands years, AI estimated it for me at 40 billion people. Who knows how close that it is, but let's just go with it for a second. If you took a conservative estimate that the average life span of those 40 billion people was 70 years, and they averaged 10 sins an hour, all of which is low because people used to live longer and the Bible tells us every inclination of man's heart outside of Christ is only evil all the time, but let just take the low estimate- 245 quadrillion sins. A quadrillion is a billion millions, and it keeps going up by the second. If you've ever seen the U.S debt clock and you think that's bad, think about the world's sin debt clock, with you and me included. And what does the Bible say God does with all those sins? HE DOESN'T COUNT THEM AGAINST US!

That's the unbelievableness of the message of reconciliation, that "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, *not counting people's sins against them.*" How could that debt ever be reconciled in God's checkbook? How can his holy justice, which is offended by every single one of those sins, be satisfied in order for him to forgive them and not hold them against us. Because he made an exchange, one precious one to cover the cost for all the rest, "**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**" That exchange was not made with gold or silver, but with the precious blood of his Christ—the one who was holy for the ones who were guilty, that they might be accounted righteous in God sight. And don't think this was only done for believers. No, God reconciled the world! Everyone's sins were paid for!

Does that mean that since the whole world was reconciled, the whole world will go to heaven? Well, no it doesn't. "**God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in Jesus shall not perish but have eternal life.**" (John 3:16) The reconciliation that was objectively accomplished for the whole world is individually received by the believer through faith. So by grace alone, the world is reconciled, and by faith alone, the believer experiences the benefits of it—the change of status, forgiveness received, and peace in the relationship.

And now here is where part 2 comes in. God bestows that saving message to people through the ministry of reconciliation, which sounds like a complicated thing, but it isn't. God takes the people who

already trust in the message of reconciliation through Christ and uses them to share it, to minister with it to others. **“We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”** (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Think of that! We not only get to enjoy the status of being redeemed and reconciled, but we also get a promotion and title! We are ambassadors of Christ. We are sent with his authority to be his mouth and voice so that Christ’s message might come through us. It’s a crazy thing when you think about. Before God, we desperately need Christ to stand in our place and cover over us, and before the eyes of mankind, Christ is pleased to have us sinners stand in his place and make his plea through us, **“Be reconciled to God!”**

That concept gives us a couple of wonderful teachings of our faith. One is called the *Universal Priesthood of All Believers*. It’s the truth that every believer, pastor and plumber alike, has the privilege and responsibility to appeal to others and implore them with God’s reconciling message. Every believer declares the praise of the God who called us out of darkness and every believer has been sent to carry out this ministry.

That means you get to stand before the man who knows the unspeakable things that he has done to ruin his past relationships, or the woman who thinks what she did can never be forgiven, and you get to say, “God does not hold these things against you because of his Son Jesus Christ.” It also means you may need to stand in the path of someone you love and say, “No more of this! You can’t continue like this! Come and be reconciled to God!”

That leads us to the doctrine of *Vocation*- which is the truth that every believer has been called to faith, and now because of that calling, serves God in whatever earthly role, job, or vocation you find yourself in—Father, mother, son, daughter, employer or employee, pastor, baker, insurance salesman, or whatever it is. Your role on this earth is an avenue for you to be Christ’s ambassador, imploring others to be reconciled to God.

That’s a calling we never take a vacation from, as if we were going to try to step aside from being a Christian. Here’s what I mean. Imagine if you were the President’s official ambassador to Europe and you were sent there with the President’s authority to broker a peace deal to end a war. What if you got to the country, but instead of going to the meetings, you thought, “I’ve never been to Europe before. These meetings can wait. I’m going to see the sights, check out the Eiffel Tower, and the Louvre, and Buckingham Palace, and when I’m done with that, then we’ll get on with this ambassador stuff.”

When the President finds out you took a vacation instead of going to make the appeal for peace, and there’s people out there dying, he’s not going to be very happy with you. In the same way, we can’t allow our lives to become dedicated to one earthly pursuit or distraction after another, while the great calling of our life sits unattended to. Being an ambassador of Christ has urgency, and though we get to change jobs or take vacations from earthly jobs, our calling to hold out the message of Christ remains the constant in every interaction we have.

So the **1) message of reconciliation and 2) the ministry of reconciliation** encapsulates our entire lives in a beautiful way. The message constantly reconciles and refreshes our soul, and it energizes us for our mission and ministry. And God has been carrying out this ministry a lot longer than 175 years. He’s been doing it exclusively through believers since the day Jesus ascended into

heaven. We thank him for the message and ministry through the ages, for the 175 years of blessing he has granted to our church body in its space and place in time.

If you think about it honestly, ***CHRIST THROUGH US*** really is a statement we have no business making, that anyone would be able to see Christ through us, the darkened, tainted windows that we are. And yet Christ declares that statement to be true of us. It becomes the highest compliment of our lives, that he would work and be seen through us. It reminds me of the time a little boy came up to me after church. I had my white gown on, and he said, "It's Jesus." Knowing the true depth of my sins, I know better than anyone how laughable that is, and yet with the great faith of a child, that little boy expressed a deeper spiritual reality than he realized. You and I get to stand in Christ's place, holding out his hands and speaking his words, forgiving sins and making God's appeal to sinners. We get to be Jesus to the world. May it continue to be the greatest joy of our lives, that others might see Christ through us. Amen.