

“Called to Be . . . An Embassy”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Fifth in a periodic series, “Calling Ourselves Names”¹

Unforeseen circumstances meant I only delivered this sermon in Elora UC.

2nd Corinthians 5.14-20

October 18, 2015

Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

So from now on we regard no one from a fleshly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, new creation! The old has gone, the new is here!

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. 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.

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.

2nd Corinthians 5.14-20

(New International Version; adapted)

Early last year, Ethiopia came to Canada. Not the entire country, of course, nor the whole Ethiopian government, nor the head of state. They did not have to. For when Ms Birtukan Ayano Dadi presented her credentials to our Governor General, this former schoolteacher became Ethiopia’s new ambassador to Canada.² She represents Ethiopia to us.

Walk a few blocks from our parliament buildings in Ottawa, to 275 Slater Street. Go through the front doors and up the elevator. Go past a little piece of Azerbaijan, but do not go too far up or you will end up in a piece of Italy (which would not be too bad). I’m talking about those countries’ embassies. An embassy is a country’s sovereign territory. So, step off at the 15th floor, and you’ll be in Ethiopia.

This diplomatic tidbit gives us a lesson about who we are, as followers of Jesus here. The church is us, whom God gathers here. The church is other Jesus-followers, gathered in other places. Jesus the Messiah claims and calls us to be part of him. The Bible gives us ways to imagine ourselves as church. We are partnering in Jesus together; the Greek word

¹ The previous sermons in this series are: “Sharing Life” (October 21, 2012), “A Public Display” (October 20, 2013), “Jesus Gets Married” (March 23, 2014), and “A Heavenly Choir” (October 19, 2014).

² <https://twitter.com/nebget/status/428538345786839041>. For a brief biography of the ambassador, see <http://diplomatonline.com/mag/2014/04/new-arrivals-spring-2014/>

for this sharing-partnership is *koinonia*. We are called out by God to do public business together; the Greek word for this calling-out is *ekklesia*.³ We are a choir, singing to God. We are married to Jesus, his bride for whom he gave himself. We are Jesus' body, the Spirit's temple, a household, a people.

And, we are an embassy. As we heard in the Bible reading, we are Christ's ambassadors.

II

Let's think about what ambassadors and embassies do. How can that shape what we do, our church here?

An ambassador represents one country to another. Governments send their ambassadors to speak on their behalf. Even with modern communications, face-to-face conversations are vital for understanding, especially when there is tension. (If you send emails, you know what I mean.) Ambassadors do that.

An ambassador grows familiar with her host place and people. She lives among them, immerses herself, even learns the language. All this so she can more effectively represent her home country. She comes to know those to whom she is speaking, so she understands how her messages will be heard by her hosts.

She shows her hosts what her home is like. If you want to learn about Ethiopia, call the embassy. We've heard about that country's hardships; it also has great history and culture. The embassy staff will love to tell you about their home. They will help you visit it, even move there.

An embassy is a gathering place for expatriates from home. If you were a Canadian in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia's capital), you might have dropped by our embassy there this week, maybe to watch a ball game.

An ambassador lives in her host country, but her citizenship is back home. She reflects her home country. She speaks for her home country. She really needs to know, then, her country's policies and positions, so she can represent and advocate for them well.

III

So what about us who are Jesus' ambassadors and, together, his embassy?

Like an ambassador, we get close to people outside the embassy. We immerse ourselves in our neighbourhoods. Your neighbourhood might be the streets around your home. It

³ These words had secular meanings, which early Christians adopted to describe their own fellowships.

might also be your school, or your workplace. It might be the sideroad your farm is on. Know your neighbours. Build relationships. That's ambassador work. An ambassador cannot be consumed with keeping the embassy in good shape, running smoothly. That is important, but only insofar as it serves her purpose: representing her home country to her host community. She's got to be out there. She's got to be known.

As Jesus' ambassadors and embassy in this place, what is our focus? How well are we known?

That's one side of the coin. Let me give the flip side. An ambassador loses her effectiveness if she becomes too much like her hosts. Her job is to represent her home. She needs to remain rooted there, where she has been sent from. That's where her loyalty lies. She can love and appreciate her hosts, but she does not belong to them.

What's the warning here for us who represent Jesus in this place? Sometimes, I think the unofficial United Church mission statement is: *Thou shalt not be weird*. If we belong to Jesus, though, we will stand out, at least in some ways.

The *Holy Spirit* gathers us here to represent *Jesus*. We do not represent ourselves. It's not about our programs, our plans, our priorities, our policies. It's about his. We represent him.

IV

In the Scripture today, we heard Paul say, "*If anyone is in Christ, the New Creation has come.*" God who crafted the first Creation is now fashioning you, and us together, anew. All things, as they are brought into Christ, God makes new.

John Wesley said those who belong to Jesus "*[have] new life, new senses, new faculties, new affections, new appetites, new ideas and conceptions. [Their] whole tenor of action and conversation is new, and [they live], as it were, in a new world. God, [people], the whole creation, heaven, earth, and all therein, appear in a new light, and stand related to [them] in a new manner, since [they are] created anew in Christ Jesus.*"⁴

Jesus sends us as his embassy, his ambassadors. We are representatives of this New Creation, sent to express it within the old.

So Paul can say, "*from now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh.*" For him, "flesh" was not about bodies. He did not have a hang-up about physical things. "Flesh" was how he talked about the ways the world works. "Flesh" are the things we took for

⁴ Wesley's notes on the Bible; www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.i.ix.vi.html

granted that too often took us away from God. We saw people through our “fleshy” eyes. Like cataracts, our old prejudices, fears, and misshapen values caused us to see people poorly. Now that we belong to Jesus, the Spirit is clearing our eyes, to see as he does.

Now, Paul says, “*Christ’s love compels us.*” The Greek word here has a sense of a pressure that moves and motivates us. Christ’s love is such that he gave himself to death for the sake of everyone, instead of and on behalf of us all. Such is his love that pushes us.

Through Christ Jesus, God was reconciling us and the whole world to himself. That relationship with God that we have twisted wrong, God-in-Jesus turns right. God mends together that which we tore. God heals that which we diseased. God forgives our sins—our wrongdoing toward God, our wrongdoing toward our neighbours. Reconciliation.

V

This reconciling God is the Sovereign who sends us. Jesus makes you his ambassador. Jesus makes us together his embassy.⁵

You’ve noticed that the world draws energy from division and discord. Fear and suspicion are powerful fuels so easily harnessed to do harm. Paul would say they are “fleshy.”

Into that, Jesus sends us: “*You are my ambassadors.*”

Among us, do people experience reconciliation, as divisions come down? Among us, instead of suspicion, do they see generosity? Among us, instead of fear, do they catch the fragrance of trust in Christ Jesus?

In an essay this month in the New York Review of Books, novelist Marilynne Robinson wrote, “. . . *fear is not a Christian habit of mind. As children we learn to say, ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.’*” She continues: “*Christ is a gracious, abiding presence in all reality, and in him history will finally be resolved.*”⁶ So we need not fear.

Birtukan Ayano Dadi was an ordinary school teacher, who became her country’s ambassador to Canada. Our Sovereign Jesus sends us ordinary people to be his embassy, his ambassadors, in Centre Wellington and all our neighbourhoods today.

⁵ Leslie Newbigin called the church “God’s embassy in a specific place.” He also wrote that “the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.” [The Gospel in a Pluralist Society](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 229 and 227.

⁶ Marilynne Robinson, “Fear” [New York Review of Books](#) (September 24, 2015) www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/sep/24/marilynne-robinson-fear/