

“Called to Be . . . An Embassy”
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Fifth in a periodic series, “Calling Ourselves Names”¹
Delivered at Bethany UC on its 172nd Anniversary

2nd Corinthians 5.14-20

November 8, 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 worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come! 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)

As Bethany United Church, us being together is something God is doing.

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.² We are called out by God to do public business together.³ We are a choir, singing to God.⁴ We are married to Jesus, his bride for whom he gave himself.⁵ We are Jesus’ body, the Spirit’s temple, a household, a people.⁶

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 The Greek word for this sharing partnership is *koinonia*. See 1st John 1.1-19.

³ A called-out assembly was an *ekklesia*. These words had secular meanings, which early Christians adopted to describe their own fellowships. See the repeated use of *ekklesia* in Romans 16.

⁴ Revelation 15.2-4

⁵ Ephesians 5.18b,21-33

⁶ Body of Christ: 1st Corinthians 12.12-31; Temple of the Spirit: 1st Corinthians 3.16 and 6.19; Household of God: Ephesians 2.11-22; People of God: 1st Peter 2.9-10.

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

II

The funeral service for Ken Taylor was last week. Remember him? In 1977 he became Canada's ambassador to Iran. The Shah still ruled Iran then, but two years later he was overthrown by a revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Then, a mob stormed the American Embassy and took its staff hostage. However, six diplomats escaped, and Ambassador Taylor and his wife, along with another Canadian couple, hid them for more than 2 months until they could be secreted out of the country to safety.

Keep that story in mind, as we think together about what ambassadors and embassies do. How can that shape what we do as this embassy of ambassadors, Bethany United Church?

What does a good ambassador do?

III

Ambassadors speak on their country's behalf.

Even with modern communications, having face-to-face conversations is vital if we are going to understand each other. Especially when there is tension or conflict. (If you've ever tried to have a healthy feud by email, you might know what I mean.) Ambassadors do that.

Taylor's formal title was *Her Majesty's Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Canada to Iran*. (I'm glad I didn't have to answer his phone!) Notice whom he represented . . . the Queen, our head of state, and her government, then led by Prime Minister Joe Clark. Taylor did not speak for himself. He represented someone else.

Who does our embassy, this congregation, represent?

IV

To represent their home country, **ambassadors must understand their host country.**

Iran is an ancient nation, with a rich and sophisticated culture. And, a revolution was brewing. Ken Taylor had to understand it. To do that, he had to get to know people.

As Jesus' ambassadors, we need to be close to people outside this embassy. We immerse

ourselves in our neighbourhoods. Our neighbourhoods might be the streets around our home. They might be our school, or our workplace. They might be the sideroad or line we live on. Know your neighbours. Build relationships. That's ambassador work. An ambassador cannot be consumed with keeping the embassy running. That is important, but only insofar as it serves her purpose: representing her home country to her host community.

V

However, while ambassadors are immersed in their host country, **they belong to their home**. Their loyalty is to their home. They speak for their home. They express their home country's values and priorities. They know their home government's policies, so they can represent and advocate for them. They remain rooted in their home. They can love and appreciate their hosts, but their belonging is elsewhere.

When the fugitive diplomats showed up at his door, Taylor acted according to his Canadian values. What do you imagine the Iranians thought when they found out? He lived in Iran, but he was not Iranian. His priorities and values were different.

What's the warning here for us who represent Jesus in this place? If we belong to Jesus, we will stand out, at least in some ways. Sometimes we will be celebrated for it. Sometimes, we will be criticized.

The *Holy Spirit* gathers us here, but not to represent ourselves. We represent *Jesus*.

VI

Ambassadors need to adapt.

Ken Taylor arrived in an Iran that seemed stable. Yet within a couple of years, all was in turmoil. His job changed. Then, when the American diplomats needed his help, it changed again. He needed to change too.

Last week, Paul Miller was with you.⁷ He talked about Ruth and Naomi, and how their seemingly small story was part of the Big Story which God is writing. He reflected on how we can make a difference in our changing world. Circumstances are changing around us. Certainly things are different than they were when Bethany began, but they're also different from how things were 50, 25, or even 11 years ago when I became your pastor.

⁷ Paul is the Support Minister for Waterloo Presbytery. You can find his sermon, "The Gospel in Miniature" here: <http://elorauc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015-11-01-Paul-Miller-Gospel-in-Miniature.pdf>

Always, we are learning to adapt.

And always, Jesus' call to us remains: love God with all we are, and love our neighbours. As Paul Miller said, *"The results are up to God."*

VII

Ambassadors show others what their home is like.

Taylor's actions showed the best of Canadian ideals. (The only Canadian thing he did not do was apologize!) He was not flashy. *"I've wondered if I'm not more like Austin Powers than James Bond,"* he has said.⁸ Joe Clark said last week that *"... it was a very Canadian thing to do."*⁹ Americans were grateful to us. Taylor later said that, in the days and weeks after word got out of what they had done, *"[Canadians in the States] couldn't [pay for] a beer. They couldn't get a traffic ticket. They got free rides on buses."*¹⁰ He did us proud.

Even in our changing times, we, Bethany United Church, Jesus' embassy here, are called by Jesus to show others what he is like, and what he is doing.

In the Scripture today we heard: *"If anyone is in Christ, the New Creation has come."* God who crafted the first Creation is now fashioning us, and us all, anew. All things, as they are brought into Christ, God makes new. Jesus sends us as representatives of his New Creation. He sends us to show it within the old world.

We heard: *"from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view."*¹¹ This "worldly point of view" is everything we took for granted, which too often took us away from God. Like cataracts on our eyes, our old prejudices, fears, and misshapen values caused our hearts to see people poorly. Now we belong to Jesus, and the Spirit is clearing our hearts, so we can see as Jesus does.

⁸ Charles Enman, "Obituary: Ken Taylor 1934-2015" [Ottawa Citizen](http://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/obituary-ken-taylor) (October 16, 2015).

<http://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/obituary-ken-taylor>. Accessed October 27, 2015.

⁹ Colin Perkel, "Ken Taylor remembered as 'simply a legend' for his part in Iran rescue." [Toronto Star](http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/10/27/ken-taylor-remembered-as-simply-a-legend-for-his-part-in-iran-rescue.html) (October 27, 2015).

www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/10/27/ken-taylor-remembered-as-simply-a-legend-for-his-part-in-iran-rescue.html. Accessed October 29, 2015.

¹⁰ Enman, [Obituary: Ken Taylor](#).

¹¹ A more literal translation would be *"from a fleshy point of view."* This can be misleading, however. It suggests that Paul was speaking against things physical (flesh). For him, however, "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.

We heard: “*Christ’s love compels us.*” It’s his self-giving love that led him to death for the sake of, instead of, and on behalf of everyone. Such is his love that now pushes us.

We heard: 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. That which we tore, God mends. That which we diseased, God heals. Our wrongdoings toward God and our wrongdoings toward our neighbours, God forgives. That’s reconciliation.

VIII

This reconciling God is the Sovereign who sends us. Jesus makes each of us his ambassador. Jesus makes us all together his embassy.¹²

By our very existence together, we represent Jesus. Instead of worldly suspicion, we are an embassy of generosity. Instead of fear, we are an embassy of hope. Instead of division we are an embassy of reconciliation. When we are gathered together, we are Bethany. And when we are apart, we are Bethany. Because when gathered and when deployed, we are the embassy-church. Into our townships and villages, along country roads and lines, into our places of work, of volunteering, of learning and teaching . . . Jesus sends us. We are an embassy of Jesus Christ!

So together, let’s continue to give thanks to God! Amen.

¹² 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.