

On Sunday, we talked about God's command to the disciples. **"Listen to him!"** *Listen to Jesus.* Tonight, we heard St. Paul's words to the church, **"Be reconciled to God!"** Which means, the people had listened to Jesus, but then they stopped listening, and they started to be naughty again. Lent is a great time to be reminded that we tend to do that—to be naughty, to sin—and to hear again the Lord's voice calling us to be reconciled to him. That's what we're going to talk about tonight and what it has to do with our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

2nd CORINTHIANS 5:20b-6:10

We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. ^{6:1} As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. ² For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. ³ We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. ⁴ Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; ⁵ in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; ⁶ in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; ⁷ in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; ⁸ through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; ⁹ known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

When you get stopped for speeding on the freeway, the state highway patrolman gives you a ticket on behalf of the State of California. When you get a parking ticket up on Greenleaf, the meter maid tickets you on behalf of the City of Whittier. St. Paul didn't represent California or Whittier, but he represented God when he said to the people in Corinth, **"We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God!" (v.20b)**

He was saying, Look, I know God, and God knows me, and we have this arrangement. He rats you out, and then I come and tell you to make things right. If I do my part and if you do your part, God will do his part and he will forgive you, and everything will be fine. However, if I drop the ball and if you don't repent, then all hell is going to break loose, literally.

Paul was telling the Corinthians that they had drifted away from following the Lord. Reading the rest of the letter, you get a pretty good idea how bad it was, how far they had drifted, which was pretty far. Faith Lutheran is not like that church!

Nonetheless, it is the tradition of Lent that we reflect on our moral condition and consider the price Jesus paid for our lives on the first Easter, to ponder the judgment of God on humanity without Christ, and to respond with gratitude to the Lord for his mercy for us through his Son.

When the church in Corinth stepped back to evaluate its condition, the people probably discovered they had lapsed into being worldly almost by accident. It started out with a small thing, like skipping the weekly prayer meeting because they were busy. They skipped one week and then they skipped another one until they weren't attending any longer. And then they stopped joining in on the Sunday fellowship as regularly as they had in the beginning when everything was so exciting. There were other things to attend to, after all.

Fortunately, God does not keep a registry of church attendance. Unfortunately, however, our hearts do. In Corinth, the more the people started to take their relationship with the Lord for granted, the less they committed themselves to building that relationship.

Which, as we know, is the answer for why any relationship falls apart.

And the results were devastating for the Corinthians. The fruit which had been so abundant in their lives in the beginning of their walk with the Lord began to wither, and then the weeds took over—weeds of uncertainty and doubt—and then other fruit began to grow, fruit which Paul called in his letter to the Galatians the **“fruit for death” (Galatians 7:5)**.

There's always a danger of drifting away from Jesus, becoming worldly instead of otherworldly in our thinking, as was the case for the Corinthians.

Paul wrote, **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”**

The first part of that sentence is a good meditation for self-examination during Lent. Please say it with me:

**God made him who had no sin [REPEAT]
to be sin for us [REPEAT]**

The Cross I wear tonight reminds me that Jesus became my sin on the Cross.

The ashes I bear on my forehead tonight reminds me that without Jesus, I'm toast, or more accurately dust.

And this verse of Scripture reminds me that the process of reconciliation was not a one-time thing, but it happens over and over and over again until I meet the Lord face-to-face at the Resurrection.

On the other hand, Paul didn't want the people in the church to grovel in their sin in a state of hopelessness as if they'd lost God's favor and were benched for the duration of the game, so to speak.

Again, Paul said that Jesus became **“sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”**

Did you hear about the Toronto Maple Leaf-Carolina Hurricane ice hockey game on Saturday? Both of the Maple Leaf's goalies were out of the game, but they'd just started the 2nd half. There was a hockey rink maintenance guy watching the game from the sidelines. He used to play minor league hockey until 15 years ago when he had to have a kidney transplant. His name was David Ayer.

Hockey rules permit it, and so the team asked David, “Hey, ya wanna be the goalie?” And he said, “Yah, sure, yabetcha.”

And so they put gear and a jersey on David, and he played goalie. And how'd it go? He blocked eight shots and won the game for Toronto!

One more time: Jesus became **“sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** God put his jersey on us. But it doesn't say “Toronto Maple Leaf.” It says “Jesus.” That's what it means to **“become the righteousness of God.”**

Paul continued. He wrote, **“As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain” (v.1).** The Lord pours his Spirit into our hearts that we might know his presence. In this presence we are filled with courage. With this courage we take risks, we have dreams, we do things we never could've imagined before we knew the Lord, and we are God's co-workers.

We are a lot like David Ayer, the miracle goalie for the Maple Leafs. He just needed for someone to say, We need you, and you can do it. Believe, act, and make a difference.

That's what the Lord has been saying to each one of us from the beginning: Believe Jesus died for your sins and you are a child of God. And take action—that's what Paul meant when he said don't take **“God's grace in vain.”** You are co-workers in the kingdom.

Paul wrote about the Lord: **“he says, ‘In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.’ I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation” (v.2).**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week, let us reflect on how we need the Lord's help, and let us give thanks for how he has helped us through the Cross of Christ.

Let us imagine knew ways we might serve the Lord as co-workers in his kingdom, not taking his grace in vain.

And let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.