

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from March 18, 2007

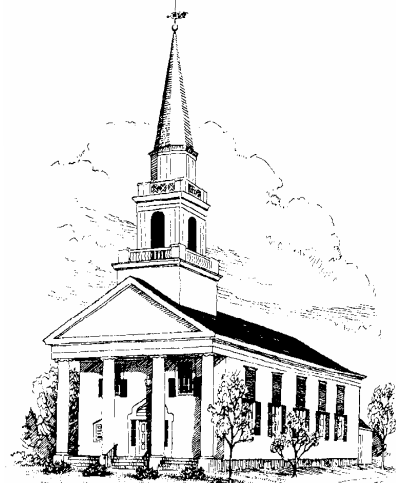
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“Ambassadors for Christ”

Scriptures:

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32



I want to begin this morning by acknowledging that it is my privilege to begin serving among you as your interim pastor. I am grateful for the warm welcome I have received this week and the many greetings and conversations I have already had with some of you. Please come by the office and see for yourself how things look! Please drop in or set up a time to talk with me! I want to get to know you.

This Sunday is the mid-way point in our Lenten journey. Lent is a time of preparing for Easter. Lent is all about moving from death to life. Lent is all about a time of renewal of our faith, a time for *metanoia*, a change of heart. Lent is a “spring cleaning” time for our hearts. Lent is all about preparing for the Easter party to come.

During Lent, we try to let go of that which no longer works for us. During Lent, we try to simplify and purge our lives of excess so that we can create new open space for something new to come into our hearts. Lent is a time for getting re-connected with God.

We make these changes in our hearts, in the very core of our being each year during Lent, so that we can be really ready to receive the gift of Easter morning—the promise of life eternal, the grace of a life beyond death, and the blessing of a life everlasting. Lent is also all about waiting ... and this church knows a lot about waiting.

Both of our biblical passages for today revolve around the concept of reconciliation. Reconciliation is defined as the “coming to agreement of two or more persons after misunderstanding or estrangement.” The Greek word used in the new testament for reconciliation is one that means ‘the restoration of harmony, specifically harmony between human beings and God.’

We know without much question that there is the need for reconciliation in our world today, reconciliation between us and God, as well as reconciliation among human beings on this planet, and even reconciliation between us and God’s creation. There are so many examples of broken relationships and signs of *dis*-harmony in this world today!

We can easily think of the broken relationships among us due to the issues of sexism, racism, culture wars, intolerance, or any of the other myriad of reasons that come up when folks are not in harmony with one another. We can think of relationships that are broken in our own households and among those with whom we work. We can probably think of all too many examples of disharmony & brokenness in our communities, as well as in this country, and most certainly around the world this day. Some

might even go so far as to suggest that we live in a time when much of the whole creation cries out for reconciliation!

We can see brokenness and disharmony around us in the natural world. We can see evidence of our own mistakes in caring for this earth—its air, water, and land as well as its myriad collection of animals & plants. I think we can probably agree that there is need for reconciliation—for the restoration of harmony—in a wide variety of places and in a wide variety of relationships in our lives today. We are not talking about a distant or a foreign reality!

Paul's letter to the church at Corinth reveals that reconciliation was even needed in the first century as it is still needed in the 21st century! The early church was having a number of arguments and disagreements about all manner of things. Paul was here writing to remind folks that God is the compassionate one who reconciles people to Godself (5:18). This is one of Paul's favorite ways to describing what salvation means.

Salvation for Paul means being brought back into a right relationship with God, being reconciled with God. Paul points to the awesome reality that because Jesus Christ lived among us here on this earth, that everything is changed about the way we can live. That's what he means when he says that those who follow Jesus Christ can live out a new creation. He writes, "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 ..."

Paul then reminds us that all of this means that "We are ambassadors for Christ." Paul reminds us that God has already begun this work of reconciliation through Jesus Christ. Paul then affirms that we are invited to continue to carry on the work of reconciliation that Christ began, as well as to support one another in that difficult work. To believe *and* to be a follower of Jesus Christ demands something of each of us! We are commissioned for the work and the service and the ministry of reconciliation.

So what does it mean to be commissioned as a reconciler? What does it mean for us to be an ambassador for Jesus Christ in the year 2007 in this community of Mystic, in the county of New London, in the State of Connecticut, in the United States of America, in the western hemisphere, on this planet earth? As ambassadors for Christ, we follow in Christ's footsteps, right? We try to figure out how to be and to act like Jesus, right? As ministers of reconciliation, we try to bring new life and harmony to a hurting world, right? And how do we do that????

Gordon Hunter (in his book *When the Walls Come Tumblin' Down*) suggests the following: "God has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation. This is the essential message of the church and it is summed up in one word: love. We are entrusted with the message of love, hence the church at its best must be a center of love ..."

God has presented us with the task of being ambassadors for Christ. God has given us this ministry of reconciliation—a bridge-building ministry, a ministry of new life. A ministry of new creation ... How do we do that? How can we be ambassadors for Christ?

Well, in the coming weeks, we will each have an opportunity to be ambassadors for Christ in one very concrete way. Everyone will soon be invited to offer up a gift to the annual interdenominational appeal to the *One Great Hour of Sharing* offering.

Through offerings like *One Great Hour of Sharing*, our gifts are used internationally to help communities with basic needs such as growing food, preventing and treating illness, learning to read, as

well as creating safe water supplies. *One Great Hour of Sharing* moneys reach out into 90 countries of this world and make a huge difference in the lives of those they reach! *One Great Hour of Sharing* offerings also support disaster response both domestically and internationally as well as refugee ministries. In recent years, moneys from *One Great Hour of Sharing* have provided relief and recovery in a variety of places around this country as well as around the world.

Giving of our wealth is only one way that we can be ambassadors of Christ, of course. In the coming weeks, I know I will come to understand many of the ways this community of faith actively embodies being ambassadors for Christ. I'm sure I will come to know many other ways that members here are reconciling agents and witnesses to their faith! I look forward to learning more and hearing about how this church functions!

In our gospel lesson, we heard the remarkable parable that Charles Dickens once described as the "finest story ever written." (*All the Parables In the World*, p. 285) Jesus knew how to touch the heart-strings of his listeners, didn't he? This parable of the forgiving father provides us with a story which defies time and historical context. This simple story speaks to us today just as clearly as it probably spoke to those who heard it in the first century!

The question that Jesus was trying to respond to was, "Who is welcome at God's banquet table?" The Pharisees were distressed that Jesus was eating with tax collectors & sinners ... and no wonder! Tax collectors and sinners were known as folks who were forced to engage in dishonorable professions in order to survive.

Jesus did welcome the tax collectors and the sinners to the table (both literally and figuratively) because Jesus was anticipating the in-breaking of the kingdom of God where all the rules would be changed! Jesus was courageously enacting a protest about the regular order of things. Jesus intentionally chose to eat with those who were considered "unclean" because through him those meals became a parable of the reconciling presence of God in the midst of all humanity. (Joseph C. Weber in *Open Hands*) Jesus was an agent of reconciliation.

The parable invites us to look at many different sides of a story about one family whose lives need reconciliation. The parable calls us to look at all sides of our own story and see where our lives need reconciliation! As we hear this parable, we catch glimpses of ourselves as various characters therein: perhaps at one time the prodigal son himself or perhaps as the older brother or even perhaps as the one who welcomes, mediates, forgives, and loves. What about the mother of those two sons—what do we suppose the mother might have had to say? Or what about the next door neighbor?

Jesus invites us to enter the story at whatever place we need to hear it for our lives today. We all need to hear the Good News that God forgives us no matter how many mistakes we've made. We all need to hear the Good News that, in God's eyes, none of us are outcasts and that each of us is welcomed, valued and loved by God.

We may need to wrestle, as the older brother did, with the idea that life just doesn't seem fair sometimes! We may have to look at the reality that sometimes we'd rather sulk our way through life than accept that which we have been given! We may need to consider how we can be, like the father in the parable, the one who opens our arms and runs to the one in need and forgives even before the confession is complete.

As ambassadors for Christ, we are invited to build bridges among those who are not reconciled. As ambassadors for Christ, our task is to create harmony where there is discord. As ambassadors for

Christ, our task is to develop authentic partnerships with people in need. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are each invited to become ambassadors for Christ and ministers of reconciliation. To become a new creation, we must approach every relationship with the amazing grace of God's unconditional love.

Let us go out this week to seek to become even better ambassadors for Christ! Amen.