

27 September 2020
2 Corinthians 5:16-20
Journey toward Reconciliation
Mennonite Central Committee
Centennial Sunday
First Mennonite Church

100 years ago, Mennonites experienced incredible hardship in Soviet Ukraine, and Mennonites from Canada and the US sought to help them. Today, 100 years later, MCC continues to work in more than 50 countries around the world in the name of Christ.

As with any celebration, it's important to reflect on why we, as a church, do what we do together with MCC.

Today, I want to reflect on a text that stands at the heart of MCC's—and indeed—the church's mission: 2 Corinthians 5:16-20, the wonderful text in which Paul speaks of New Creation and the ministry of reconciliation.

You will have noticed that a couple of extra items have been added to the order of service, so I want to be mindful of time. Reminds me of this one bulletin blooper that attempted to report what had happened the previous Sunday in church. It said, The Rev. Adams spoke briefly, much to the delight of his audience! I will offer a few observations about this wonderful and powerful text and restrain myself with only one story.

First, the key word in this passage is reconciliation (Greek: *katalaggē*). Not only is this word rarely used in the NT, but it's not a religious word in ancient Greek either. Religious people back in Bible days didn't use the word reconciliation when seeking to appease God by offering sacrifices, to cleanse their feelings of guilt, or receiving divine pardon for sins. Rather, it is a word drawn from the sphere of **politics**; it refers to dispute resolution. So one could speak of the diplomatic reconciliation of warring nations or, in the sphere of personal relationships—like the



reconciliation of an estranged husband and wife. This is how Paul uses the word in 1 Corinthians 7:11.

So, the key insight here is that Paul is speaking about terminating hostility between estranged parties, overcoming alienation and establishing new and peaceful relationships. We can see this clearly in Romans 5, the other key passage where Paul uses reconciliation terminology: “...*while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son*” (Romans 5:10). God has taken the initiative to overcome our hostility and alienation from God and to restore us to peaceful relationship with God. It’s a reminder that we didn't earn our way into God’s Kingdom. We are here because Christ reached out to us, won us back to God. Through Christ, God reconciled us. It's God's grace.

Second, Paul connects reconciliation with the phrase, **new creation**. The reason he does so has everything to do with his audience—the Church in Corinth. The Corinthian Church appeared to be anything but a new creation; they were a factionalized and contentious community. They were challenging the legitimacy of Paul’s leadership and comparing him unfavourably to other charismatic preachers who were slicker and more powerful speakers; Paul sarcastically calls them “super-apostles” (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11). So Paul is writing this part of the letter to convince the Corinthians that the death of Christ has abolished the old standards for what counts as power and persuasiveness. That is to say, the standards for **knowing rightly** have been transformed by the cross. And in light of these new standards—in light of the New Creation that God has brought into being—the Corinthians must honestly reflect on how their rivalry and boasting and conflict fit or don’t fit into this new world God has brought and is bringing into being. As part of this new creation, they must be reconciled to Paul and to one another.

And that leads to my **third point**: some older bible translations like the KJV, state, “If any man be in Christ, *he is a new creature.*” **This is inaccurate.** Rather, Paul blurts out, in a burst of wonder, “If anyone is in Christ . . . *New Creation!*” The background of this text is Isaiah 65:17, where God declares: “*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.*” The new creation Paul is proclaiming is NOT just lone individuals being new creatures, but it includes the **transformation of the world**. Paul is summoning us to see all things made new in light of that transformation. Note verse 19 where Paul writes, “God was reconciling ***the world*** to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Not just individual souls that go up to heaven after a person dies. No. The frame of reference is cosmic and corporate. Paul is not just saying, “Look at me, my sins have been forgiven, and so I’m now a new creature.” He is saying that the **whole world**,

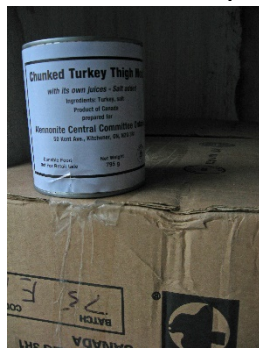
including the rocks, plants, animals, fish, the air we breathe, the water—everything is being made new by the cross and resurrection, and that **all our relationships** must be re-evaluated in light of that transformation.

Finally, one consequence of God’s reconciling act in Christ is the astonishing fact that God has entrusted us—you and me—with the **ministry of reconciliation**” (5:18). That is why Paul can go on to use the metaphor of us being “*ambassadors for Christ*”, as we are God’s representatives who share God’s love and compassion for all in the name of Christ. We do this by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice. We do this as individuals, congregations, and together with others through MCC. Everything and everyone are on this journey towards reconciliation.

Earlier, we listened to the historical reading of MCC and how Mennonites here in Canada and the US responded to basic human need in Soviet Ukraine by sending food. I could share many more stories of MCC’s work in North Korea, how MCC responded to the famine there in the late 1990s, and then how MCC responded to the ongoing food security issues there by working with collective farms on conservation agriculture projects.

MCC sent various types of food to orphanages. We oversaw shipments of

- Canned meat



- Dried apples



- Soup mix, and



- Soybeans...



- ...that were processed into soymilk for children.



Responding to human need is one aspect of this journey towards reconciliation. Another one is creating the space so that God can bring peace to broken



Northeast Asia Peace Camp, 2014

relationships. When I worked with MCC in Asia, I worked together with people from China, Korea, and Japan on a project we called, the NE Asia Peace Camp. Due to a long history of conflict, fear, and war, young people in Northeast Asia carry burdens of hurt and hatred for each other. There are very few

chances for these people to be together in a setting where they could work at building understanding and peace. We created this 2-week summer camp experience where young people from China, Korea, and Japan would participate in activities that foster group bonding and cooperation; learn conflict transformation skills; and, spend lots of time together learning about each others' lives and cultures.

Listen to the words of Zhang Ling, a Chinese participant, who experienced transformation on the journey towards reconciliation.

“When I heard about this peace camp, I was very excited...I really like to meet people from other countries. But when I heard that Japanese people were also going to this camp, I was not sure about joining. From movies and historical stories, I didn't like Japanese people. My friends and I often made jokes and said bad things about the Japanese when we heard about Japan. But in the peace camp, when I first saw the smiling faces of the Japanese participants, I was shocked. They were not cruel and bad as I had believed. I played with them and together we studied about peace. I found out they are the same like me, longing for peace. I want to bring what I learned about peace back to my family and friends. I want to tell my friends that now I have four Japanese friends and I like them. I am really looking forward to going back to the peace camp next year.”

Making friends with the Japanese participants at Peace Camp had a continued effect on Zhang Ling. The following year, in 2011, when an earthquake and subsequent tsunami devastated parts of Japan, Zhang Ling's friends cheered upon hearing of the catastrophic event. Zhang Ling was able to muster up the courage to tell them in class, that they shouldn't cheer, because the Japanese were people too, and that he was feeling sad that day with the news, because he had friends in Japan who were experiencing something so devastating.



God worked in Zhang Ling's heart and mind through this MCC project because we created the space that allowed it to happen.

So, you see, this message of reconciliation is not just a promise of life after death in heaven, not a hope of bliss in a distant disembodied future. Rather, it is a message announcing that God's work of reconciliation has begun. The ministry of reconciliation has begun, and we are caught up in this cosmic journey towards reconciliation. That is extraordinarily good news, because it means that even in the midst of present suffering, conflict, and war, we can trust that God's reconciling power will prevail.

The New Creation is no vain hope; those who are taught to know reality through the cross and resurrection of Jesus know that it is the true destiny of the world—a world created, sustained and reconciled by the love of Christ. Amen.