

CHURCH AT THE CROSSROADS *If Not Now*

2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2

September 29, 2022

How did we get here? Some version of this question comes up in nearly every substantive conversation I'm having these days. *How did we get here?*

I'd wager my experience is not unique. The contexts are diverse, but the implication seems the same. For starters, *here* is a place we'd rather not be, a place we don't want to be. It's a place of anxious worry over an uncertain future now under threat. It's a place of widening interpersonal chasms and deepening institutional distrust. It's a slow boil of frustration that may erupt at any moment, a place of instability on the global stage that parallels our personal precarities.

How did we get here? How? How did we get here? The answers are, of course, complex. There is no single throughline we can trace from *there* to *here*. Ours is a multicausal dis-ease. But there are symptoms, and these symptoms often include an ache for the loss of something sacred, something stable. It is a universal truth that none of us want to live in fear, or anger, or contempt, or disgust, or shame.

However we got here, we agree we need a new map, a way out. We're at a crossroads. We can wallow in the wreckage around us, lament where we are, or we can chart a new course.

Way back in the First Century, writing to a budding band of believers brought together by faith in Jesus Christ and very little else, the Apostle Paul urged the Corinthian Christians to move beyond their passivity and their cynicism and get busy right now with the work to which God had called them.

That work, that message, that word: reconciliation. Now it might surprise you to know this is an odd word

to find in sacred scripture. In Greek, the term *katalasso* comes not from the religious or spiritual realm at all, but from the worlds of politics and the law. In that context, the term *katalasso* describes redefined relationships that result from the resolution of disputes. After conflict and negotiation, there is reconciliation. Paul borrows the term to insist that this is what has happened to us through Jesus Christ. We are reconciled to God. We are made new. New creation. Good news. But Paul is equally clear that this redefined relationship is not just a gift that we receive. What God has given us, according to Paul, is a ministry, the ministry of reconciliation. That is, having been reconciled to God, we must now reconcile with one another *so that* (Paul's words) God's grace toward us is not in vain.

The assignment is overwhelming. How do we even begin to practice reconciliation? Paul has an answer to that question. The first step: we must make a decision to **see** differently. Now I will confess that I missed this detail in every previous reading of the text. It's somewhat obscured by the English translation that renders the word *regard*. But the word is *to see*. This time it hit me with the force of truth that the passage posits a pledge.

From this time on, from now on, we will see no one from a human point of view.

We will see each other through the lens of God's love. Faith is a new set of glasses. Just imagine how this could change us. The Apostle Paul believed that we have eyes other than those in our head. In the Letter to the Ephesians, he describes "the eyes of the heart." Do you know what it is to be seen with the eyes of the heart, what it feels like to be seen as God see us?

When I was a freshman in high school, I was desperate to fit in with one particular group of boys at school. They all lived in the same neighborhood, Forest Oaks. They all rode the same school bus. They all played sports together, and they were all invited to each other's birthday parties. I so desperately wanted to be in that circle. Since I didn't live in the neighborhood or ride the bus or play the sports or receive invitations to the birthday parties, I decided I would use the gifts I had—humor and wit—and that the cafeteria would be my proving ground.

One Friday lunchtime, I sat down nervously. But I came prepared, and I started cracking generic jokes. It was working! There was laughter, muffled at first, but the group warmed up over time until it became clear that I would need to be more specific in my use of humor. You see, there was a boy in our grade who was often the object of teasing and sometimes far worse. Philip happened to live across the street from me, in my neighborhood. He rode my bus. And the truth is we were friends. We played together after school. But in that moment, my choice was clear, and it was stark. I knew what I had to do to fit in, and I did it. Timidly at first, but my confidence grew along with the laughter of my new friends. I was so absorbed by the attention I was receiving that I didn't notice Philip get up from his seat and slink out of the cafeteria. I certainly didn't notice our history teacher who was standing in the corner, but when we got up to leave the cafeteria, he walked over and asked me to sit down. From across the table, I knew the look in Mr. Causey's eyes. He had seen and heard the whole thing. As my cheeks turned red, I wondered what the consequence would be. But what Mr. Causey said had far greater impact than any punishment he could have delivered. *Chris, I want you to know why I am so disappointed with the way you treated Philip at lunch today. You are a role model for other students. I have high expectations of you. I think you have high expectations of yourself as well. I'd like you to remember that. You can go.*

To be seen with the heart's eyes is a blessing that bears a burden. Mr. Causey's words challenged me to be the person he saw in me. What if we saw ourselves, and each other, through the lens of God's love? What if we looked, really looked, for the image of God in those we struggle most to love?

Paul says that we are ambassadors for Christ. That is, we have been sent by God with the message of reconciliation, that God sees more in us than we see in ourselves or each other. But we can see with God's eyes, and Paul says this is the moment when reconciliation begins. I'm also convinced that it is an urgent task for the faithful in our time.

Early in the American experiment, the French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville observed a presidential election in the United States. Writing about it, he described the time as a kind of sickness in which the body politic became dangerously feverish. For a time, emotions ran too hot. The fragile forms of consensus essential for democracy—what de Tocqueville called our "habits of the heart"—evaporated.

I've been thinking about this observation all week long. I've been wondering what might break the fever within us, what might renew the habits of our hearts. Finally, it hit me that we are the keeper of those habits, those values, those virtues. We who follow Jesus. God expects more from us. We who ground ourselves in God's grace, who seek the Spirit's guidance in our words and actions. We who have been given this charge to repair, to heal and reconcile. We who believe that every human face reflects the image of God, that every human soul is precious in God's sight. We are the ones who are most needed right now because crossroads moments are not rare. We make decisions every single day that determine our character and shape our future. God sees more in us than we could see on our own. Paul speaks to us, "See, now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation." Because if not right now, then when? If not us, then who? God expects more from us because God sees in us the promise of new creation, of redefined relationship, of bridges across the breaches between

us. It begins when we open the eyes of *our* hearts to see neighbors instead of enemies, possibilities in the place of pessimistic prognostication. We make a pledge:

From this time on, we will see no one from a human point of view.

We will pray to see what God sees, to see through the lens of love to see Christ in the guise of the stranger. *When* did we see you? Every time you encounter another child of God. Every time.

Marilynne Robinson always has the right words. Listen to these. "Who might he not be? He told us who he was—the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, the stranger. For Christians the incarnation of Jesus changed the world in one great particular. We now know whom we slight, insult, ignore, forget. The parable that is our faith would tell us that he is... always present, always waiting to be seen."

And so, my friends, if there is to be a movement toward reconciliation, let it begin here and now. If there is to be a revival of compassion, let it begin. If there is to be a renewal of civility, let it begin. If there is to be a repairing of what is broken, let it begin with us. If there is to be restoration of our streets, our relationships, our hearts, our land, let it begin with us. Let it begin here. Let it begin now. But, oh God, let it begin. Amen.