

8th Sunday after Pentecost July 18, 2010

Colossians 1:21-29 "Cleaned Up and Ready to Serve"

During the Civil War, James Longstreet fought for the Confederacy, rising to the rank of Lieutenant General, second in command only to General Robert E. Lee. Lee called Longstreet his "Old War Horse," and historians have ranked him one of the finest, if not the finest, commander on either side of the conflict. He gave everything he had for the Confederacy. What about his story after the war? Longstreet converted to the Republican Party, embraced equal rights for blacks, and supported reconstruction efforts to bring the former Confederacy back into the Union. Longstreet was one of several prominent confederates who embraced the Republican Party after the Civil War. Another, Col. John S. Mosby, leader of Mosby's Rangers and known as "the Gray Ghost" during the war, did an about-face afterward, becoming a Republican and a campaign manager for General Ulysses S. Grant in the 1868 presidential race. Longstreet and Mosby stand as examples of rebels who went from being in rebellion against the United States to being avid supporters of the Union and the reconstruction efforts following the war.

People also go through a change when they become Christians. We were born rebels against Christ and his kingdom, but from the time of baptism and faith in Christ, we willingly serve the cause we once struggled against. God reconciles enemies to himself, and then God sends them to serve him and his will in the world.

Let me ask you a question. Were you alienated from God at birth? True or False?

Rebellion is in our very nature. We were born rebels, our only cause being to continue in a broken relationship from God because of Adam and Eve's fall into sin shortly after the creation of the world. Our natural, sinful self is inclined to follow a path that leads away from God and Christ. Honesty forces us to admit sin's reality, but God's revealed Word teaches us that this is, in fact, every person's inclination ever since Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. David writes about this in Psalm 51: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." We each have self-will from the time of conception, and this self-will naturally leads us on its own path away from God and Christ.

Sometimes it can be difficult for lifelong Christians to see this in themselves. I'm not asking that you necessarily observe it in yourself as much as I'm asking you to take seriously what God's Word teaches about us. It is obvious when we look around us in the world that the world is obsessed with itself and its own pleasures. Our society makes laws that glorify sin, tolerates disobedience, and accepts perversion of God's will. Society justifies sin with words such as freedom, love, or compassion. The reality is that it is still sin. God's will never changed. Rather, people have defined some sins to be socially acceptable, thus alienating themselves further from God.

Let me ask you another question. Because all people are alienated from God from conception, when have you ever felt that you and God were enemies? Ever since the fall into sin, people have made themselves enemies of other people. Last week's story of the Good Samaritan hints at the enmity that existed between the Jewish person and the Samaritan. The Civil War reminds us of the enmity that existed within our own nation between the Confederacy and the Union. A story such as Romeo and Juliet show us the enmity that can exist between families such as the Montague and Capulet families. But when have you ever felt that you and God were enemies of each other?

Enemies dislike each other and can be outwardly hostile in their hatred. Sometimes the world shows anger or hostility toward Christians, but it is really hostility toward Christ and God's will for our world. Hostility toward Christians shows that the Christian is being faithful to Christ, but it also shows how corrupt our world has become because of sin. Fallen humanity often chooses to follow its own agenda or will rather than God's. Even the Christian in his or her struggle against sin sometimes opposes God, and this is because our sinful nature remains in rebellion against God and the commandments as long as we live in this life. When we pray "Thy will be done," we are praying for the death of our own will which continues to oppose God. So whether or not we ever feel like we are God's enemies, we are enemies as long as we fail to keep God's commandments perfectly, as God requires.

In the story of Romeo and Juliet, Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet love each other deeply, but their families are deadly enemies. In desperation, and with tragic results, Romeo and Juliet both die at the end of the play by taking their own lives. Afterward, their families, once bitter enemies, place that enmity aside and reconcile to each other by shaking hands. The death of their children brings them a reason to seek peace.

In a greater way, we are no longer enemies with God because of Christ's coming. God reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ. God is Spirit, and the second person of the Holy Trinity took a human body into himself so that the spirit of God could have a human body to live and to die. In this human body, God the Son kept the 10 commandments perfectly, something that God intended Adam and Eve and all people to do from the time of creation. Through his flesh and blood, Jesus took delight in following God's will and commandments. He was God's friend in every possible way. Jesus was the Father's beloved Son who obeyed his Father's will.

Jesus walked and talked with his Heavenly Father throughout his life all the way to the cross. However, God the Father turned his back on his Son at the cross. While Jesus hung on the cross, he became God's enemy. The Son became estranged from the Father for the first time in his life. They were alienated from each other in that moment of time because Jesus had reached around the world and through generations of sinners to claim every one of our sins of thought, word, and deed. There at the cross Jesus became sin, God's enemy, and a substitute and sacrifice for the world. Jesus took on himself the eternal rejection of God and hell, the punishment which we deserve because of sin. Now through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection from the dead, we are reconciled to God in peace. We are no longer alienated from God, but we have become God's friends and children. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Now God walks and talks with us because of the forgiveness made possible by Christ's sacrifice for the world's sins.

With our reconciliation to God comes also a change in our status before God. We are now declared holy, blameless, and above reproach ó not because of our own personal obedience of the commandments, but because of Christ. For as important as obedience is, it is Christ who makes possible our holiness now in this life and before God in heaven when we leave this life. Holiness is not a quality we can seek to obtain by obedience of the commandments, but it is our new status before God that we freely receive on the basis of our relationship to Christ Jesus, by faith. We maintain this status when we continue in faith of Jesus Christ for our entire lives. We become a new creation, reborn through faith in Christ's life, death and resurrection.

This past week and weekend, many people took the opportunity to go into northeast Baltimore to work on an Extreme Makeover building project. Did anyone go down there to help, or do you know anyone that did? Extreme Makeover has taken on projects all over the United States to tear down and rebuild homes for people, and usually there is a story of a person or a family that has reached out to help others in their community, but they need extreme help themselves with their home. In the end, the new dwelling is completely changed and no longer resembles the building that once stood there. So it will also be in Baltimore in this home for girls.

Since your reconciliation to God through Christ, you have become a New Creation, and Christ lives in you! When you come to Church, Christ is in you! When you leave these four walls today, Christ is still in you! When you interact with family and friends, Christ is in you! When you go to work, Christ is in you! When you go to school, Christ is in you! When you are on vacation, Christ is in you! When you sleep in your bed tonight, Christ is in you. And when you rise again in the morning, Christ is in you and goes with you.

You are God's extreme makeover who is called to holiness, and you are God's light in a dark world of sin and a world of people estranged from God. You carry in you the hope of heaven that awaits all who put their trust in Christ. You have the words to speak that can turn people from being God's enemies to being God's friends. You are completely changed through Jesus Christ.

Therefore, just as you have become a new creation through Jesus' reconciling work, Christ also powerfully works through you! As a new creation, you have a new God-given goal ó the goal of reconciliation. Your mission ó and it's not a choice as to whether you accept it or not, but it is your goal because you bear the name of Christ ó is to present other people to God perfect in Christ. We reconcile other people to God. We turn them from being God's enemies, to being God's friends. Simply put, we tell people about Jesus. We do this because Christ lives in us, and Christ is powerfully working in us. The power that personally changed our individual lives to live for Christ is the same power that will work through our witness to others so that other people can meet our Savior and learn all that Jesus has done for them and the world. Our goal, then, is to turn people from being God's enemies to becoming God's friends. In this way, they also will be holy and perfect before God, through Christ, when it is time for them to leave this life.

Christ reconciles enemies to himself and recreates them to be powerful workers for his kingdom. Our old sinful nature is still an enemy of God and always will be, but the new nature in Christ, the part of us that is holy, blameless, and above reproach, gladly agrees with and seeks to obey God's will every day. And God's will is that we remain faithful Christ in this life and that we tell other people about Jesus Christ so that we can present them to God in Christ's holiness.

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