

## 2 Corinthians 4: 3-6 MSG

If our Message is unclear to anyone, it's not because we're holding back in any way. No, it's because other people are going the wrong way and refuse to give it serious attention. All they have eyes for are the fashionable gods. They think these gods can give them what they want, and that they won't have to bother believing a Truth they can't see. They're blind to the brightness of the Message that shines with Christ, who gives us the best picture of God we'll ever get.

Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; we're proclaiming Jesus Christ, as Lord. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus for you. It started when God said, "Light up the darkness!" and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful.

## 2 Corinthians 5:20\_6:10 (MSG)

16\_20 We beg of you, "Be reconciled to God." ...Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life is here! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone .... We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade [people] to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. ... Become friends with God....

6 1\_10 Companions as we are in this work with you, we beg you, please don't squander one bit of this marvelous life [of grace that ]God has given us. God reminds us,

I heard your call in the nick of time;  
The day you needed me, I was there to help.

Well, now is the right time to listen, the day to be helped. Don't put it off; don't frustrate God's work by showing up late, throwing a question mark over everything we're doing. Our work as God's servants gets validated—or not—in the details. People are watching us as we stay at our post, alertly, unswervingly . . . in hard times, tough times, bad times; when we're beaten up, jailed, and mobbed; working hard, working late, working without eating; with pure heart, clear head, steady hand; in gentleness, holiness, and honest love; when we're telling the truth, and when God's showing God's power; when we're doing our best setting things right; when we're praised, and when we're blamed; slandered, and honored; true to our word, though distrusted; ignored by the world, but recognized by God; terrifically alive, though rumored to be dead; beaten within an inch of our lives, but refusing to die; immersed in tears, yet always filled with deep joy; living on handouts, yet enriching many; having nothing, having it all.

Next week we actively begin our Lenten journey to Easter. This week we conclude our scripture study of what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ... for the transformation of the world. Like Jesus, we are beloved children of God. Jesus called some to join him, like us, called to love and serve others, to be God's hands and feet and heart, following with right action...

In the short time of Jesus' active ministry, he preached the Good News, healed the sick, and ate with outcasts and sinners. He helped bring people to their senses. The word *demon* didn't get the full force of the negative meaning it has today until at least the fifth century. A "dæmon" and "daimon" from the original Greek and then Latin was a "godlike power" though a lesser god. Daemons are benevolent or benign nature spirits, spirit guides, forces of nature. Certainly, we recognize that there are lesser gods and distractions and attachments and even addictions that grab our attention, that pull us away from being all we can be. Paul has described this process in our scripture, through the interpretation of The Message.

[Some] people are going the wrong way [following lesser gods] and refuse to give God serious attention. All they have eyes for are the fashionable gods. They think these gods can give them what they want, and that they won't have to bother believing a Truth they can't see. They're blind to the brightness of the Message that shines with Christ, who gives us the best picture of God we'll ever get... [But, *WE* are drawn to the light... to the Message of love shared by Jesus].

So as Jesus' disciples, we are called to love and heal, to do what we can to be of support to others and to mend ourselves and this weary world.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we get the impression that this early Christian community, this group of people that were being guided through Paul in The Way of Jesus... they were struggling to learn what it meant to live and love unconditionally as a faith community. And they were learning live into being people of reconciliation. Even though they were at times separated from God and each other (as we can be too), they were learning to renew their connection to God through their relationships with each other.

Reconciliation is about restoring right relations, making peace, and living in harmony with others. Richard Hays explains that

...Where Paul uses the verb “reconcile”... \_\_ he is speaking about overcoming alienation and establishing new and peaceful relationships.... The Corinthians were a [fractured] and contentious community. They were challenging the legitimacy of Paul’s leadership and comparing him unfavorably to other charismatic preachers who were slicker and more powerful speakers... Paul is writing this part of the letter to convince the Corinthians that [the ministry] of Christ has abolished the old standards [for power... for community....Through the life and ministry of Jesus we enter into the light of] a New Creation that God has brought into being \_\_ the Corinthians are encouraged to stop their rivalry and boasting and conflict. They are asked to be reconciled to Paul and to one another.... Paul believes that [reconciliation] is implanted in us ... Our commission from God is [to BE] a community called to embody the righteousness of God in the world \_\_ to incarnate it... in such a way that the message of reconciliation is made visible in our midst. And of course reconciliation made visible is something that can appear only in practices that show unity, love, mercy, forgiveness and a self\_giving grace that the world could not even dream of apart from Christ. (Richard B Hays)

We here at Christ Church are a reconciling congregation. What does this mean? Do we embody God’s all inclusive love and grace? We accept all people, and welcome all to fully participate in God’s church. If we’re not careful, these are just words. This commitment extends a wide open welcome to our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, but what are we doing to LIVE this, to put this on and wear it.... Being reconciling is much bigger. We must continue to ask ourselves, what are we doing to embody this radical welcome for ALL people?

There is a Greek word often translated in scripture for sin - *hamartia* which means to “miss the mark”... to be off balance. We all experience this.... When we give our attention to lesser gods... to the demons that can distract us, we get off balance, our loyalties and priorities are divided. Instead, we are called along with the Corinthians, to “Be reconciled to God.” ... [through our relationship with Jesus Christ, we] get a fresh

start, we are made new. The old life is gone; a new life is here! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other.

I have just started reading a book called Tattoos on the Heart by Father Gregory Boyle. I had only read the short preface, and I was already in tears. Greg Boyle created is the founder and director of Homeboy Industries in LA, a gang-intervention program, for twenty years. He begins with a very powerful story of reconciliation.

The original bakery [set up using former gang members as employees] was hugely famous from its first week. News crews would visit us almost daily. Articles were written with photos of enemies working alongside one another. Tour groups came from all over the world. ...

Our foreman at the time was a man named Luis, in his mid\_twenties, who arguably had been among the biggest, savviest drug dealers our community had ever known. We knew each other for more than a decade, and any offer of a job was always, graciously, but surely, declined. Luis was as smart as they come and quick\_witted..... He never got caught. Too smart. If the cops rolled by and he was standing with me, he'd mumble, "Beam me up, Scottie."

But when his daughter, Tiffany, was born, things changed. He wanted to work at the bakery, and his natural leadership abilities soon moved him up to foreman. Not only did he work with former rivals, he also supervised them, which is a great deal more difficult.

One day we received a request for a tour from farmers from the central valley of California. They wanted to see the bakery. It's part of Luis's job to greet the busloads and the film crews. He hates this part of his job, and his whining could make your teeth ache. "Do I gotta?"

The day the farmers arrive, he and I were waiting for the bus to pull up... Finally, the bus drives into the awkward bakery parking lot and I wave and direct it to its reserved spot. It's one of those

ultramodern buses, sleek and slick, equipped with a microphone at the front of the bus for the tour guide.

Luis pretends [with me that] he's the tour guide. "Welcome to Homeboy Bakery," his voice nasally drones with tour\_guide disinterest. "Observe gang members in their natural habitat."... He is holding his fist up to his mouth, for greater amplification. "Please keep your hands in the bus at all times. Do not attempt to feed the homies. They are not yet tame."

"Cállate, cabrón," I say through the part of my mouth not smiling, welcoming our visitors from the farmland as they get off the bus.

Later in the day, I visit the bakery, and I ask him. "How'd the tour go?"

"Damn, G," he shakes his head. "What's up with white people anyway?"

"I don't know, what is up with us?"

"I mean, damn," he says, "They always be using the word GREAT."

"We do?"

"Oh, yeah. This buncha gabachos stroll in here and see the place, and it's all firme and clean and machines workin' proper, and they say, "This place is GREAT." And then they see the homies, tú sabes, enemies working together all firme, and they say, "You fellas are GREAT." Then they taste our bread and they go, "This bread... it's GREAT." I mean, damn, G, why white people always be usin' the word 'GREAT'?"

I tell him I don't know. But, trust me, every opportunity I could find after that, I tell him how 'GREAT' he is, just to mess with him a little.

Four months later, it is nearly closing time, and I arrive at the bakery in the evening. Luis sees me in the parking lot from inside the building and rushes outside. He's excited, and yet "enthusiasm" is not ever the card with which Luis leads. He's too cool for that. He barely lets me get out of my car.

“Hey, G,” he says, thrilled to see me, “You not gonna BELIEVE what happened to me yesterday after my shift.”

He proceeds to tell me that, after work, he goes to pick up his four\_year\_old daughter, Tiffany, at the babysitter’s. He puts her in the car, and they drive to their tiny apartment, where, for the first time, Luis is paying rent with honestly earned, clean money. He unlocks the front door, and Tiffany scurries in, down the hallway, and lands in their modest sala. She plants her feet in the living room and extends her arms and takes in the whole room with her eyes. She then declares, with an untethered smile, “This... is GREAT.”

He tells me that he lowers himself to her eye level, placing his hands on his knees for support. “What’s great, mija?”

Tiffany clutches her heart and gushes, “MY HOOOME!”

Luis seems to be unable to speak at exactly this moment. Our eyes find each other, and our souls well up, along with our eyes. We can’t stop staring at each other, and tears make their way south on our faces. After what seems like longer than I’m sure it was, I break the silence.

I point at him. “You...did... this. You’ve never had a home in your life – now you have one. You did this. You were the biggest drug dealer in this town, and you stopped and baked bread instead. You did this. You’ve never had a father in your life – and now you are one... and I hate to tell you this... but... you’re great.”

*(And I hate to have to tell YOU this, but the first time I retrieved this story from my memory bank was to tell it at Luis’s funeral. He wasn’t doing anything wrong on the day he was killed. He was loading the trunk of his car, in the projects, readying himself for a camping trip with friends. Two gang members, with their faces covered, entered their “enemy’s” territory, looking for “fools slippin’.” They saw Luis and must have thought to themselves, “He’ll do.”)*

*They walked up to him and executed him.*

*I told the “Great” story at Luis’s funeral largely because of the questions I had repeatedly been asked by his friends and homies during the week that spanned his death and his burial.*

*“What’s the point?,” they’d ask. “of doing good... if this happens to ya?”*

*It was a good question, worthy of a response. I told the packed church that}*

*Luis was a human being who came to know the truth about himself and liked what he found there.*

Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century female English mystic, saw the life struggle as coming to discover that we are “clothed in God’s goodness.” [we are called to embody God’s reconciliation}

This became Luis’s life’s work. He embraced this goodness – his greatness – and nothing was the same again.

As we look at what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, we strive to strike a balance between being and doing. Some of us find the doing much easier. Give us a job and we’ll get it done. But, today’s scripture message reminds us how important it is to BE - to be reconciled, to embody God’s love and compassion.

There are many who are refugees from church....from God. They have been injured or hurt or excluded by others within the church. They long to reconnect with God, but they are very understandably wary. They want to be seen and known, just as they are. **Our** lives are bright with God’s love. We have been brought out of the darkness and been shown the light of possibility. Now, we must reflect this to others.... to all others. “If you want to become my disciples, then Follow me.”....loving, preaching, teaching, healing. We are called to be the Love we want to experience in the world.... to be an example.... to be the hope that another needs to feel. We are called to fully enter into the sunlight of the spirit....as we strive to be reconciled.... to live in harmony.

