

**St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church
Modesto, California
April 24, 2005**

Final Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Text: 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2, especially 5:16a

^{5:14} For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

¹⁶ **So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view.** Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

^{6:1} As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. ² For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. NIV

Dear Brothers and Sisters of our Lord,

Has it ever happened to you that something gets stuck in your head, a thought that keeps bouncing around and that won't go away? I've had such a thought the last few months. It's the section of the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, which was read earlier. This verse especially caught my attention: **So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view.** (2 Corinthians 5:16a) Let's think about these words, words that tell us that...

CHRIST'S LOVE CHANGES EVERYTHING

- How God sees us
- How we see Jesus
- How we see pastors
- How we see people

How God sees us

- In the old Lutheran service book I used to use when visiting people who were homebound or sick, I remember a line in the confession of sins: "I ask you before God, who searches the heart, is this your sincere confession?" That's a frightening thought—God searching our hearts. But he does. God sees us and knows the darkness within us. He knows our secrets. He knows the things we're ashamed of. He knows the things we've done and thought that we want to keep hidden from everyone.

- God could choose, justifiably, to see us this way forever: as people who fail to be who he wants them to be. He could choose to take into account every one of our failures, every one of our moments of rebellion against him, every moment of pride and then hold those against us. And we would have no basis for complaining, because that would be fair. He sets the standard, and we fail to meet it. He has the right now to punish us for our sins.
- To put it another way, God could say to each of us, “You are my enemy. I didn’t make it that way; you did. I gave you life and breath, and what have you done to repay me? Gone against my wishes every chance you’ve had. You are my enemy and will remain so forever.”
- But that’s not what he does. Listen: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them.” *Not counting people’s sins against them...* This is remarkable. God chooses, of his own free will, not to count our sins against us and punish us for them. God chooses, as Paul puts it, to “reconcile the world to himself.” That is, God chooses to consider all the people of the world to be his friends instead of his enemies.
- Someone might object to this; can you guess why? “That’s good and well, but how is it fair? How can God all of a sudden just not hold people’s crimes against them? When that happens in our court system, we call it a ‘miscarriage of justice.’ So what’s going on here?” Paul responds to that objection by saying this: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” *Him who had no sin*—that’s Jesus, right? “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.” God the Father took his only Son—and his Son was fully cooperative in this—God took his only Son, who never sinned even once, and placed all the sins of the world onto him. Then he sent his Son to a cross to die with those sins counting against him. God made him who had no sin to be sin as our substitute. God punished all our sins, but he didn’t punish us. He punished Jesus in our place.
- The result for us? God now sees us in a whole new way: “...that in [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God.” Righteousness is what you have when you stand in court and the judge says, “You’re not guilty. You are free to go.” Because Jesus loved us so much, he came and took the guilt of our sin onto himself and died for it. Since Jesus died with all sins on him, God considers everyone to have paid for his or her own sins. Oh, and at the same time God gives us a gift: he gives us credit for the perfect life that Jesus led. The result is that God the Father looks on us as sinless people. He’s not obligated to see us this way; in love he chooses to. Christ’s love for the people of the world has changed the way God sees us. He sees us now as his friends and not his enemies.
- My prayer is that this message always may remain the bedrock foundation of St. Peter Lutheran Church. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting people’s sins against them.”

How we see Jesus

- What do people think of Jesus? Lots of things, right? It always amazes me, every year at Christmas and Easter, the stream of articles about Jesus in major news magazines. You know the ones: “Who was Jesus really?”—that sort of thing. Then

there's the fictional dreck of things like *The DaVinci Code* in bookstores and *Revelations* on TV. Some of these books and shows and articles give some worthwhile information and raise some thought-provoking questions. Others, though, strike me as condescending: "You silly Christians with all your traditional beliefs about Jesus. Let me enlighten you; let me tell you who he really was and what he really means."

- How about a different approach? How about we view Jesus as the Bible views him? How about we see him as the fullest and best expression of God's love for human beings? How about we see him as the pivotal person in the history of the world? How about we see him as the one who holds everything together, the one on whom everything depends? How about we see Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? And as our "righteousness, holiness and redemption"? And as the one who lives so that we also may live? And as the one who loves kids and blesses them? And as the one who brings the dead to life? And as the one who forgives sinners? And as the Savior of the world? And as our Lord and our God? How about we view him as the one we live for, since he lived and died for us and was raised again?
- Paul puts it this way: "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer." We can't see Jesus just as some intriguing person who lived a long time ago. Because of his love for us, we see him as someone who lives right now to bless us with his love, to give us life.
- My prayer is that all of you—as well as those not with us today—may see Jesus this way, until you see him face to face.

How we see pastors

- Christ's love changes how we see him—and how we see ourselves, too. Paul talks about himself here—himself and the other apostles and proclaimers of the gospel. He tells us how we should view pastors and ministers of the gospel in light of what he's told us. To recap, he's told us that God counted the sins of everybody against Jesus, and based on that then declared himself at peace with a world of sinners. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." Now Paul says, "And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."
- Ambassadors. They are people who represent a country. Our ambassadors around the world represent the United States in faraway places. I imagine it's an honor to serve as an ambassador of our country, to represent the US and all its people. At the same time, to be an ambassador is to be, in a sense, a servant. If an ambassador in a foreign country suddenly stops liking the country he's in, he can't just say, "The United States no longer is your friend." No, he's not authorized to say things like that. He can't make policy; he can only announce it.
- That's true for pastors, too. On the one hand, it is an honor to be able to represent the Lord to people. It's a joy to be able to say to them, "God has forgiven all your sins. Believe it. Enjoy it. God has reconciled the world to himself. Now be reconciled to him." Paul even goes so far as to call ministers of the gospel "God's fellow

workers.” God chooses to work with human beings to administer his reconciliation and peace to the world.

- See what this means? It means that we should regard our pastors and Christian teachers and other ministers of the gospel as what they are: God’s ambassadors. It’s good and right to respect ministers because they speak to us on God’s behalf. They sometimes speak bad news from God—bad news about our sin and his judgment. But really their stock and trade is to announce good news: Your sins are forgiven. It’s right to hold them in high regard.
- At the same time, it’s good to remember that pastors are servants, too. They are servants of God; they’re not authorized to make policy, but only to deliver the messages God has given them in the Scriptures. And sometimes they fail. Sometimes they sin. Pastors need the same grace of God and the same forgiveness as everyone else does. They have no right to claim any special status closer to God based on who they are. They are, as all Christians are, servants of the ultimate Servant, Jesus.
- Do you know why pastors wear vestments, the special robes and clothes we put on each Sunday? One reason is to set us apart. These vestments are kind of like a uniform. When we’re wearing them, they serve as a reminder that we are acting in an official capacity. We are called by God to speak his words to you, to forgive your sins, to convict and comfort you. We are called to preach his Word and administer his sacraments as his ambassadors.
- At the same time, these vestments are meant to cover us. The individual who is here doesn’t matter so much as what God is doing through this individual. We are sinners like you, but sinners covered in the righteousness of Christ and sent to do his work. Pastor Janke and I have matching vestments. That’s more than just a fashion decision. They make us visually interchangeable. It doesn’t matter if Janke or Micheel or the new pastor is here so much as it does that Jesus is. He is working through these servants, these ambassadors, to do his work. And that work is announcing, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting your sins against you. Believe it. Be reconciled to God.”
- I thank you for seeing me that way, as a fellow forgiven sinner acting as an ambassador of Christ. I ask you to continue seeing Pastor Janke, a faithful ambassador, in that way. And I ask you to see your new pastor in the same way as well. I know you will.

How we see people

- Before I came to St. Peter, Pastor Janke mailed me a packet of information about St. Peter. Among the things he sent was a member directory. I looked it over—lots of names. But at that point they were just names.
- Not anymore. Now when I see your faces and hear your names I see and hear stories. I picture things like weddings, hospital beds, classrooms, living rooms—all kinds of occasions, both good and bad. And the common thread in all of them is Jesus Christ, who was there with us in his Word and Sacrament, giving us what we needed. I can’t look at you from a worldly point of view—not anymore. Which makes it hard to leave.

- At the same time, though, this new view of people is why I am leaving. You know Salt Lake City holds the headquarters for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or Mormons. In spite of its name, Mormonism is not a Christian church. It denies key truths revealed in the Bible like the Trinity and the deity of Jesus Christ. And ultimately, it proclaims a message of supposed salvation based on people's works: do good, be good, follow these rules, and you will live in the afterlife.
- When I received the call to Salt Lake City and began to talk about it, I started to get the impression that as far as some people were concerned, we ought to just write off the whole state of Utah. "Let the Mormons have it!" But because of Christ's love, I can't see things that way. There is a city of over a million people whom God chose to love. There is a city full of people for whom Jesus wanted to suffer and die. There is a city full of people, hundreds of thousands of whom have been led to believe a lie: that through their efforts to follow the rules and live a good and decent life, they will gain life everlasting. There are people to whom God has said, "I have reconciled you to myself, not counting your sins against you." And they're missing out on it—on the free gift of grace that God is giving them through Christ.
- Pastor Mike Quandt, with whom I'll be working in Salt Lake City, said to me a couple months ago, "Bottom line—let this be the thing that may lead you to decide to move a family of six hundreds of miles away: Do you want to be a part of what the Lord is doing here in this unique mission field?" And I decided that I did. So we go to join your brothers and sisters in that place to tell good news to people like us who need it.

Christ's love makes things so complicated. In some other world we all could have met each other, become friends, said our hellos and goodbyes and that would have been that. But because Christ Jesus has thrown his love into the mix, things are a whole lot messier. There's heartache and joy and sadness and excitement and smiles and tears. Nothing simple about this goodbye. It's all messy. All because of Christ's love.

But I hope you'll join me in saying, "Lord Jesus, your love means so much to us that we wouldn't have it any other way." Amen.