

“A Community Called and Sent”
a message by Dr. Bruce Havens
BASED ON THE THEME, “GO! COMMUNITY”
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.
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2 Corinthians 5:16-20 [NRSV]

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

The Jacksonville Jaguars are in the midst of “training camp.” The players have been drafted or signed as “free agents.” They have come together and are in training to get ready to be sent out onto the football field and play football. Many fans who root for them see them as representatives of the fans themselves and even of our community. Their character as individuals became a topic over the past year or so and some whose character didn’t measure up have been sent away and new guys with better “character” have been drafted or signed and of course the bottom line is winning football games.

Too bad it isn’t as clear what it means to be a member of a church as it does to be a member of a professional football team. It isn’t totally clear what the “bottom line” might be with a church. Is it just growing attendance and better offerings? That might be one measure, but I suspect God would say there is more to it. Even Paul talked about his

churches being full of spiritual babies who weren’t growing in their spiritual life, but were simply wanting to be served spiritual pabulum. If we agree that being part of a church is being part of a spiritual community, let’s look at how Paul defines that role.

Certainly most people who are in a Christian church understand themselves as representing Christ in some way, but how do we understand that? Paul says we are “ambassadors” for Christ. He says we, like him, represent Christ to the world. In the same way NFL players are drafted or signed as “free agents,” Paul says God has called us to be “ambassadors.” We are called by God. Most of you know what it means when a pastor is “called,” but maybe you don’t think of yourself as “called.” The reality is Paul says if we are “in Christ” we are called by God. What does it mean to be “in Christ” and to be “called?”

One writer says it is important to realize that the key is to know we are

called by God to be “in Christ.” Being “in Christ” and being “in the church” are not the same thing. Being in Church does not automatically make one a Christian any more than being in an oven makes one a biscuit. When Paul says we are “in Christ” he seems to mean that we have changed. We often talk about this as “conversion.” This isn’t so much about being converted from some other denomination or religion as it is being converted from the values and perspectives of the dominant culture to the values and perspective of God.

Patrick Brennan, a Catholic priest and writer says, “Conversion -- it is about so much more than changing denominations. It involves the ability to think paradoxically or, as I would say, *paschally*. Such a process involves being able to re-interpret even life’s struggles through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.... [which leads to] breakthroughs to new levels of being.” He goes on to say, “Conversion is ... awakening to the whole Gospel -- the necessary connection between the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached, and the transformation of society with the power of the Gospel. Jesus did not intend His words to be misused for feel-good religion.”¹

The Apostle Paul says that if we are in Christ we are a new creation. Just before this he makes the point that when we are in Christ we no longer view things from a human point of view. I think this is what Patrick Brennan means when he says we look at things from a

“paschal” viewpoint. “Paschal” comes from the Latin word that represents the suffering of Christ in his life, death and resurrection. So if we are “in Christ” we are a new creation and we see things and people from a new point of view.

Now, this new creation, this “conversion” is often seen as an all-or-nothing, one-time event. Others of us see it as a lifelong process of becoming more and more “in Christ.” Was it last year, talking about the Jaguars, that the press made a big deal about how defensive tackle John Henderson’s commitment to the team was being questioned? He made a statement for the media in which he said again and again he was “all in.” “I’m ‘all in,’” he said with a big smile on his face, insisting that he was completely committed to the team.

Many of us would like to say that as Christians we are “all in.” But I think this is difficult if we are honest. We may want to be “all in.” We may believe we are “all in,” yet often our actions, and attitudes betray us. Even Paul, the great Apostle of Jesus Christ, admits that he had times of “doing that which he did not want to do and of not doing that which he wanted to do.” I know in my own experience the Christian life is one of continually working at staying the course, of correcting myself or being corrected by the Spirit of God or by the challenging words or actions of others when I have not been completely “in Christ.”

What gives me hope is that Paul says God is not counting my sins against me. God does not regard us in the old way any more than we are to regard

¹ “From Conversion to Mission,” #3621, csec.org/csec/sermon/brennan_3621, 3/7/92.

others or the world in the old way before we were “in Christ.” So while we see that we are not always “all in,” yet God is still looking at us through the new lens of grace. And I think the other hopeful thing is that we are called to look at others in this new way too. We are called not to look at others “from a worldly point of view.”

I think a “worldly point of view” leads us to look at others in judgment. We reject someone’s value because of their race or their sexuality or their politics or their religion. It seems that Paul believes that God doesn’t use those measures. God has made us a new creation, God wants to help others to be a new creation and God invites us to see others through God’s eyes. God is “reconciling the world to himself” through Christ says Paul, and so we don’t have to judge, exclude, or reject people because of human or worldly values.

The hard part for Christians is that we often confuse worldly values with God’s values. We even call some of those worldly values God’s values. As those who are called by God to be “in Christ” we are called to a different point of view and we need to test our attitudes and actions by the measure of God. Here, Paul says that God’s value, God’s measure, God’s priority is to “reconcile the world to himself.”

This leads us to the “sent” part of being a “called and sent” community. Paul says we are “ambassadors of Christ.” That means, like an ambassador from one nation is sent to another nation, to represent his government, God calls us to go out into the world as his

representatives. In truth God’s “government” of our lives and of our world is our highest allegiance as those who are “in Christ.” It is higher than any other affiliation. It is the top priority. And Paul says that priority is one of letting people know that God’s loves and forgives and sees us all as new creatures. “The old has gone, the new has come!” shouts Paul.

What a great message to take to the world! We don’t have to judge or condemn or convert the world. We don’t have to “make” them Christian. That is God’s job as God sees fit. Our role is to represent the good news that Christ has made all things new and in that new reality God is seeking to set aside everything that separates us from God. Whatever anger, whatever bitterness or grief keeps us from loving God and experiencing God’s love is gone. Whatever sin, whatever separation from God, from others, from our true selves is gone. Whatever pain, suffering, or difficulty we may have thought was God’s punishment we can let go of because it is gone. All things are new says Paul. And he says that our role as Christians is to be ambassadors for Christ to those who do not know how much God loves them and longs to bless them.

When we talk about being a “GO! Community” this is what we are to “go” and do. This is what we are sent to share. This is how it all comes together. We have been exploring the spiritual blessings of community. We talked about how we all long to be part of a community of acceptance and how that is the authentic community God intends the

church to be. We talked about how the church is called to be more than a place for religious consumers to get filled, but a community of service. This morning I want us to bring those two together hear the Scriptures calling us together as a community and sending us out – in short, how we are a “GO! Community.”

Perhaps the best metaphor I have heard to make this come to life is that the church is like a ship. There are many kinds of ships. The problem is many people just think of the church as the wrong kind of ship. There are battleships – I don’t think that is a very helpful image for the church, although in the past we have often used military images as metaphors for the Christian life and for the church. I had a chance a long time ago to visit the battleship North Carolina in Wilmington. I loved walking aboard that ship and I marveled at the size of it and the job it did for our nation in war. But as I think back on it, it is also a little sad because it is permanently in port. A ship is meant for the seas. It may come into port for repairs, or to be resupplied or to take on new crew or passengers but it is meant for the sea. Even in storms our Navy sends its ships out to sea because they are better off there than at port in a storm in many cases.

Many people think of the church and the Christian life as a luxury cruise ship on which they pay a fare to get taken care of, and to be carried to paradise in style and comfort. Some Christians even believe that if you have done certain things well – if you have “paid a higher fare” so to speak – you should have a better room in the resort when you arrive

in paradise. The problem is that God does not call us on board the USS “Church” to be pampered and served and to dine at the buffet until we are stuffed.

If the church is like any kind of ship it is a freighter. It has a crew that is called to work. It comes into port to load supplies and maybe make repairs and perhaps to take on new crew, but its purpose is to carry that freight to its destination. Its place is on the sea not in port. It is built for work not for leisure. It is commissioned – that is it is called and sent – to carry the cargo it has been given to those who await it. In the same way we are called to carry the cargo across the seas to those who are alienated, separated, or don’t know that they are God’s beloved children too. They are the ones God sees in a new way just the same way God sees us.

The invitation to be part of the GO! Community is an invitation to accept God’s call to be his ambassador. To serve in that capacity we have to understand that we have been called and that we have been sent. We are called to come together to hear and remember the good news that when we are “in Christ” we are a new creation. This gives us new eyes, a new heart, and a new purpose. This often requires us to grow into our role as ambassadors “in Christ.” Growing as an ambassador comes as we understand we are sent out into the world to share this same good news with others – to act in the capacity of ambassador and to speak the words of reconciliation to everyone. God is making his appeal through us! Let us be a GO! Community. AMEN.