

The Rev. Michael C. Fedewa

4th Sunday of Lent

March 18, 2007

Joshua 5:9-12

2nd Corinthians 5:17-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Sometimes Grand Rapids can feel like a pretty big sophisticated city. We have theatres, convention centers, museums, and symphonies, opera companies. We have universities and colleges. We have the finest in hospital systems. Grand Rapids has many big city attractions, as well as a certain, small city charm.

There are many things in Grand Rapids that we don't have. As I was thinking about the readings today, it occurred to me that we do not have anything approaching an "embassy row". We do not have an area of town where foreign dignitaries live, we do not have a diplomatic corps, or an international center. As far as I know, we do not have any foreign ambassadors living in Grand Rapids. All this leaves us a bit in the dark when we hear Paul speak of the people of Corinth as ambassadors of Christ.

I wonder, just what is that ambassadors do. On the surface, it seems that they spend much of their time entertaining, or being entertained. Dressing up in fine clothes, jewelry and tuxedos as they attend state dinners, funerals, and other important international events. Naturally, I imagine that their responsibilities stretch further than simply being present at such events.

According to Wikipedia an ambassador is:

A minister of the highest rank sent to a foreign court to represent there his sovereign or country, an official messenger and representative. An ambassador then is the representative of his or her country in another land. An ambassador seeks to bring the concerns and values of his country to the country he is assigned. In addition then to fancy meals and ceremonies, much of an ambassador's time is spent dealing with issues like: war or peace, human rights, the environment or foreign trade.

When Paul tells the people of Corinth that they are ambassadors of Christ, he is giving them a rather lofty title. They are Christ's official representatives and messengers. They represent Christ and his values, his ideals, to this world. Christ makes his appeal to the world through his ambassadors.

At the center of that appeal is the message of reconciliation. We who were sinners, we who were distant from God because of our sins have been brought close to God through Christ. In Christ, the world that had been ravaged by sin has been created again, and made new. In Christ, relationships that had been destroyed have been restored. In Christ, that which was broken has been made whole. In Christ that which was lost has been found. In Christ, that which was dead is now alive.

Through his ambassadors, Christ makes his case to the world. Through his ambassadors, Christ appeals to the world to live lives that are new: reconciled, restored, whole and filled with life. Today's Gospel is a parable that highlights the work of ambassadors of Christ. The Gospel begins with the Pharisees criticizing Jesus because he receives sinners and eats with them. The scribes and the Pharisees knew their scriptures. They knew that eating together was a sign

of intimate connection between people. For a man of God to eat with sinners implies that God would eat with sinners. Such a message is scandalous. To share a meal is to share intimacy. For a man of God to share a meal, this symbol of intimacy with sinners implies that God would share intimately with sinners.

Jesus, acting as God's ambassador appeals to the Pharisees by telling them three parables, one about a shepherd who lost a lamb, the second about a woman who lost a coin.

These two parables are simply the literary appetizer for the feast that then follows. A man had two sons.....

In this parable, Jesus makes God's appeal. The younger son was a scoundrel---a ne'er do well. He has wished his father dead, by asking for his inheritance, then he wasted the inheritance. He has lost his family, his money, his country. He is eating the food of pigs, he has lost his religion, his identity. Finally, he comes to himself, he acknowledges that he is lost and he begins his journey home.

While still at a distance, the father sees him; he runs to greet him....dresses him in his finest robes and rings.....he welcomes him home... "This son of mine was dead and is now alive; he was lost and is now found."

The scribes and Pharisees grumbled because Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. Jesus tells them, "It's even more outrageous than that." Not only does God welcome sinners, he runs to greet them. Not only does God eat with them, he throws a banquet, and not only a banquet, but a dance.

This is how God acts, when a sinner returns. God throws a banquet, brings in the band, and leads the celebratory dance.

The ambassador's work is not yet done however. In fact, it has just begun. It is easy to throw a banquet, a celebration. The hard work comes in explaining himself to those who are offended. The older brother is scandalized by the feast and the dance. He refuses to join the celebration. He refuses to even acknowledge the other as his brother....."this son of yours" he says. The ambassador's task is to appeal to him, to convince him to join the feast. The feast will only be complete when all are reconciled. The feast will only be complete when all join the dance.

My friends, I believe that the readings today call us to take our place not with the younger brother or the older. Each one of us has gone through a time when we were either the one who squandered our inheritance, or the one who self-righteously thought ourselves better than those who have. The reading invites us today to take the place of the father. We are invited to be one with the ambassador of reconciliation, the one through whom God makes his appeal.

Reconciliation is hard work. It demands honesty and integrity. It demands a willingness to put our agenda aside, and to be able to listen to both sides of an issue. It takes more time than just choosing sides, and it puts reconciliation above even our own comfort. It demands complete and total dedication to the one who sends us, the one who makes his appeal through us.

Ambassadors of reconciliation, those through whom Christ makes his appeal are sent by Christ into the most difficult of places. They are sent into families and that are torn by strife and pain. They are sent to people who are broken and in despair. They are sent into places of business, where the bottom line is not love but profit. They are sent into communities where forgiveness is

seen as a sign of weakness. They are sent into a world where war and wealth, power and greed, hatred and bigotry bring walls of division. They are sent to a world divided by nationality, race, wealth, gender, sexuality, age, faith. They are sent into a world where divisions are so strong that reconciliation seems impossible and naive.

This is the task that we have been given. This is the purpose of our life. To represent Christ in our world. To carry to this world the values and concerns of Christ. To bring the new message of God's reconciling love to our world today. To be an ambassador of Christ's reconciling love in your family, your workplace, our community, and our world. Christ is making his appeal through you.

Sometimes Grand Rapids feels like a big city. We have museums and theatres, universities and hospitals. And, the truth is, we even have an embassy row---St. Andrew's is one of those embassies, as are all the churches of this community. Grand Rapids even has ambassadors---those who live and speak the values and ideals of a foreign ruler. We are those ambassadors. God makes his appeal through us.

God's appeal: In Christ, Sin has been forgiven. Everything is new. That which is broken has been healed. That which was destroyed is made restored. That which is dead is alive. That which is lost is found. All has been reconciled in Christ. It may not yet be complete, but it has begun.

So, in the meantime fellow ambassadors let us proclaim this message - by what we say, and how we live. Let us celebrate. Let us dance and like good ambassadors everywhere let us feast.