**10/28/18 Sermon Text**

**Title**: The Ministry and the Message of Reconciliation

**Objective:** Review some of the broader Biblical fundamentals of Witness

Motivation for greater involvement in Witness (local outreach in particular)

**Epistle Reading:** 2 Cor 5:11-21

**Sermon Text**: 2 Cor 5:20 “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (ESV)

**Sermon Transcript**

{General Introduction}

You may see me as a visiting preacher, but the truth is I am certainly not a preacher and I am not really a visitor either, since this is a very familiar church to me. Some 25 or so years ago you would have found me in the same pews in which you sit now; later perhaps I might be seen in the choir, or playing the organ; prior to that I might have been found worshiping in what is now the Parish Hall! So there is history, but also I am so happy to work very closely today with this church on many outreach opportunities. For example, I am the coordinator of an initiative called FaithNet to which Annunciation belongs, of which I will say a little more later.

For now the thing you should know about me is that I have a heart for outreach, evangelism, and mission, that is, Witness. I say this not to “commend myself to you” using the words Paul writes in his Epistle, but rather that I see, and want you to be aware, that there are people all around us that are in pain, or otherwise hurting; some are friendless, some are homeless, some cannot make ends meet; a great many have rejected, have not heard, or do not understand the gospel message, and many have a very warped idea of the Jesus that we worship.

This is a day in the life of this church when you can get serious and look beyond the sanctuary doors, consider not yourselves and the place where you worship, but that world outside. That world is an ugly world, a messy world that contrasts with your ordered lives and displays the antithesis of the beauty and peace of this sanctuary in which you feel comfortable.

{Content Introduction}

So we need to ask, “Why should we go there, why go to this messy world?”

If we are reluctant, “Are we the witnesses God desires us to be?” And, “If not, why not?”

I hope this sermon will give you some platform from which to answer such questions. First, we will look very briefly at the way in which scripture calls us to 'witness' and has always called, not as something forced on us, but something flowing out of our love of God. Second, we will look at how we can witness. Then we will ask what is required of us for genuine witness. Lastly we will look at a couple of outreach examples.

{Scriptural understanding}

So let us start by exploring what the Bible teaches us about Witness. The text I will use is from the Epistle read today, verse 20, where Paul writes, “Therefore (because we are a new creation, because Christ died for us, and since through his sacrifice, God reconciled the world to himself), we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. (And that appeal is) We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (ESV).

The “we” here that Paul uses means himself and worshiping believers who follow Jesus. Paul declares them to be “ambassadors” - not because they are commanded or appointed, but because they simply cannot hold back the truth that they know! What exactly is an “ambassador”? It was then, as it is now, someone of the finest credentials appointed by a lord or monarch to represent him in another nation, to stand in his place. Paul is saying that followers of Jesus are considered by him to have great value, and are his representatives with the special privilege of proclaiming the good news of “reconciliation” with God – that is, the gospel message. Note that it is not our message but his message. It is never “I think that...”, or, “In my opinion...”, but, “He says that...”!

It is incredible to me that God is trusting us, mankind, “new creations” (born again Christians), with the proclamation of the most amazing news of all time – the gospel message, making his glory known!

{Not a new idea!}

But this is actually nothing new! To an extent, this has always been mankind's role. This may not so obvious, so let me ask, “What is God's ultimate desire for you?” You will have many answers, but they can probably be distilled to this, “God's ultimate desire for me is to have an intimate relationship with God”. Now, there is nothing wrong with this, indeed it is an absolute essential, however, that is only provides part of the equation. The Bible shows us from Genesis onward, that his ultimate desire is this, that “we show his love and proclaim his name, his glory, (and in these days the gospel), to the nations”. That is his ultimate desire for us. The Children of Israel were to proclaim God's glory to the nations, but sadly they did not. Being the chosen people was enough for them!

If this, as God's desire, is found throughout the Bible, why do we, like the Children of Israel, tend not to embrace it? It seems there may be two principal reasons. The first is that an intimate relationship is very comfortable. Since it is all about me that makes me feel special! The second is that, in desiring everything to be about him, we see God as being selfish, self aggrandizing. In fact quite the reverse is true, what he desires it not for himself but for the enjoyment of his people, now and throughout eternity. In fact, I would say that it is us that are being selfish if we do not do all we can to make the gospel known by all those who do not yet believe! If we concentrate exclusively on project 'me' and turn a blind eye to the fate of those around us, then we are the ones who are guilty of self-aggrandizement, not God.

{Specific message of today}

Thus Paul's point to the Corinthians is nothing new, it is simply the Old Testament message contextualized for the Greek audience nevertheless made very specific: we are all ambassadors; we have a message that is not our message; it is a broader message, a glorious message, the gospel message – Christ is king, he died for all, was triumphant over death, a sacrifice through which God reconciled us to himself. Our sin is not counted against us. We are a new creation. We are redeemed.

I ask you, why would we not want to spread this news to the whole world? What could hold us back?

Perhaps we can now we can understand why Witness is carried out by those that have an intimate relationship with the Lord, because it is the very joy of this relationship that is shared when we minister. If we were to proclaim the gospel without love, without passion, without really knowing from whom it came, we will not convince anyone! Indeed, it matters not how recent a believer you are, nor your denomination, nor if you are a believer outside the established church. All those transformed are ambassadors.

In particular all of us here are ambassadors. As a result of our relationship with God, God's desire becomes our desire, and as a result God can make his appeal to the nations through us. Us, a “chosen generation, a holy priesthood, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” {1 Pet 2:5-9}

{Practical application}

So now the “how?” How can we minister? Firstly, in whatever way we minister we must communicate. But words in and of themselves do not 'witness', though they are an essential part of the equation. Rarely do facts alone stir hearts. Likewise, actions alone, without words, will not proclaim the message – Paul himself says in Romans, “how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard?” {Rom 10:14}.

Thus at all times in witness we must use both action and word, both coming from our heart, both arising out of our love for God. It is then in our 'doing' that we live our faith and it is in word that we share the reason for our faith and the truths of the scriptures.

There are a few very generic approaches to outreach and mission that we can briefly explore. To be clear, Annunciation is already involved in many ministries so this is no comment on where you are as a church! In these approaches the key words are 'presence' and 'relationship'

* one approach: establish or expand a presence in the local community, one of trust and respect, from which one can identify and interact with those whose ultimate concern is not Jesus. Be present at local fairs and events; invite organizations to use the Parish Hall for events to which the local community will be invited; write a regular column in a local newspaper or a blog; put on tutorials, run an Alpha course, or your own course.
* additional approach: develop relationships with people groups who have rejected Jesus or have not heard of him – such people may live around you or live far away. These may be people groups of different faiths, communities. The initial objective would be to share each other's beliefs and work together. To share one's faith one must first understand the culture of the person or group with to whom you speak. Often such folk if local need friendship and someone to whom they could turn in an emergency. Be aware that some may dream dreams of Jesus and will need you to explain. Know too that God will work in the hearts of those of different faiths at a pace that we cannot predict.
* further approach: reach out to those in need, meet their needs, establish a relationship and show them love, whether you simply come across them in your daily life, or intentionally plan to meet with them.

Note that at no point is there any suggestion that either the Witness or the ministry is aimed at expanding the congregation of a particular church, only the congregation of the kingdom! They may well result in more congregants at Annunciation, and probably will, but not by our design! We are not a press gang in disguise.

{What is required of us?}

What then is required of us? Bear in mind that our objective is to reveal God to the world – we are introducing the divine to the secular, and this can only be done with God's help and with his strength. Two things are required of us: submission and sacrifice. I say 'required' because although these will come naturally, pride can easily take over so that it is our ministry, and we must be ever vigilant of our role!

First we must submit to God's will and to the direction if the Holy Spirit. This is not our ministry. The Holy Spirit will empower God's ambassadors; he will infuse them with energy; he will protect them against threats. And the Holy Spirit with guide God's ambassadors, and for this they need to pray. Prayer must cover any Witness ministry.

Second, we must sacrifice – this is never popular.

One sacrifice is of resources, especially providing financial support. It is not difficult to understand why this is needed; anything from travel, buying food, renting space, and in complex ministries training and external support. This is funding beyond that required for church building maintenance, church building utilities, staff salaries, linens and candles, etc. The mission budget is one of which few churches can brag, yet without a healthy one churches cannot actually be the church that God needs them to be!

Another sacrifice is you. Your time, your compassion, your skills, your commitment, your servant-hood, your adaptability, your resilience, your desire to be who God wants you to be. And no one is excluded. No one has a get-out-of witness free card! The very old, the very young, the disabled, the infirm, the deaf, those that cannot get out and about, I have seen all such people wonderfully engaged in outreach and blessed as a result.

If you not do so already, I implore you to submit yourself to be an ambassador and sacrifice yourself especially your time and resources to participate in the outreach and mission ministries of this church and others with which it works.

{Examples}

I would now like to give some examples of outreach in which I have been involved. The fist illustrates how the Holy Spirit works in the starting of a ministry.

{Breaking Bread}

Breaking bread is a monthly outreach held in Denton which has been in operation for over ten years and on average welcomes 150 guests. Some might describe it as a program to feed those in need, but that would attribute completely the wrong emphasis. It is a ministry to care for the spiritual needs of the homeless and working poor in Denton using a meal as a vehicle over which we can talk, laugh, share, and pray, with our guests. It is Holy Spirit led and is covered in prayer by a team that cannot for health reasons attend.

I appreciated very little about the plight of the homeless before I came to the US. I think I was first introduced to it through the Austin Street Shelter ministry supported by Annunciation, but a real compassion for hurting people started to grow when I served at ministry called Blood 'N Fire in Dallas. I felt the Lord powerfully urging me to establish a similar ministry to help those in need in Denton where the homeless population was so high. The first problem was that I had never been involved in setting up such a ministry, leave alone running it! The other problem was how to avoid conflict with the City! Well, in conversation I found that I needed to identify a private location on which to hold the event, and then to formally invite guests. After some inquiries, I found that this was too complicated for me and let it slide.

But the Lord did not. I happened to visit the site of a Christian organization, 'Prayer Stop', which was about to be launched in Denton. The visit was simply out of curiosity with no design on serving the homeless (that idea was as good as dead in my mind!) but nevertheless in conversation mentioned my heart for outreach and the sort of plans that the Lord had placed on my heart. My contact immediately responded, “Well, hold it here! We have space outside!” All very well, but how to invite those in need? Not a week later I met someone who ran a pantry in Denton who offered to distribute fliers to her guests! Within two weeks we had purchased tents, chairs, tables, and all the material, then held our first Breaking Bread. Since then we have only missed one month! In addition to the spiritual leading and relational aspect of the ministry we provide a short homily, clothes, haircuts, nail care, and of course, a healthy meal. The emphasis is always dignity and respect.

{FaithNet}

Let me tell you about another ministry in which I am involved. FaithNet has been in existence for over a year. It is an ecumenical initiative involving some ten local churches whose objective is to address the needs of those currently experiencing homelessness or unable to meet the needs of the family in the immediate area, primarily Lewisville. This church, your church, is a key and active participant.

The initiative aims to establish various ministries that focus on certain clear needs that are not met by other organizations, or partner with them to make the ministry more effective in some way. There are three aspects to FaithNet's mission; meeting immediate needs, meeting long-term needs; educating ourselves through visiting experts on how to best develop and maintain the ministry.

Time does not allow me to talk too much about the ministries, but in the immediate needs section there is one that is similar to Breaking Bread Denton, and another called Laundry Love through which we fund the weekly washing and drying of clothes. The long-term needs section is still in discussion but is focusing on such issues as the housing crisis in the area.

The churches of this initiative need teams who devote time to planning and executing, teams to pray, and importantly, financial support to allow them to effectively carry out these vital ministries.

{Wrap up}

Let me conclude by iterating some of the main points that I have made:

* as worshiping believers, as those with an intimate relationship with God the creator and sustainer of the universe, we will be by default ambassadors for Christ, and desire to implore those who do not yet believe to be reconciled to God, that is accept Jesus as the only answer to every question;
* we do this by being present with and establishing a relationship with those whom we serve thus reaching out in action and word to those in spiritual or physical need, showing them love and presenting the greatest message of all time;
* outreach and mission can only be done by submitting to the Holy Spirit and through sacrifice;
* to be effective, outreach needs your time and it needs financial support. The opportunities even in this local area are truly endless but the resources are few.

My prayer is that the church in general as well as Annunciation will take to heart Paul's declaration that we are ambassadors with a message, and by working together, with appropriate resources, be successful in proclaiming it and be fruitful.

Amen