

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

“God Coming Closer”

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The Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

¹⁴ For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶ From 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. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin that knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

My husband and I have been live streaming some older films lately, ones that we remember as having been good. Recently we watched the 1984 Academy Award-winning film, *Places in the Heart*, written by Robert Benton. It explores the theme of reconciliation in the context of both interpersonal sins and the social evil of Jim Crow. Sally Field, Danny Glover, and John Malkovich carry the main storyline, but a secondary story is that of Field’s sister and her husband. The sister discovers that he has been having an affair with her best friend. Understandably, when he asks for forgiveness, she recoils from his touch, and they start living apart. The hurt and betrayal keeps her at a distance from him.

When someone hurts us this deeply, our first impulse is to distance ourselves. It’s like getting too close to a flame; we avoid it. We’re not going to let that happen again! We also start to keep count of the sins. As the proverb goes: “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.”

We see this impulse in operation on the larger stages of life too. If society is against you, you’ll stay away from its influence, as best you can. Such was the case for Horst Schalsa. We met him when he was a retired businessman, living in Paris, France. But he grew up as a Jew in Germany in the thirties and forties. Fortunately, as a teenager, he escaped to safety in England. Horst told us that he would never set foot in Germany again. Reconciliation was *not* on his radar! Can’t blame him.

The apostle Paul was hurt by the Corinthian congregation, and they him. While they loved each other and were doing Christ's mission, they still impacted each other in negative ways.

J. Paul Sampley reconstructs what happened between them through the letters and fragments of letters that we still have in the bible.¹ After founding that church, Paul wrote a letter to them, responding to their questions about faith and pledging to visit in-person. Once there, a member verbally attacked Paul, and no one in the church defended him. He was mortified. Paul had told them that he would return to visit, but instead, he sent a letter chastising them. They worked through all this, but later, other misunderstandings arose that they had to iron out.

To his credit, through all of this, Paul did some soul-searching and some rich theological reflection. In his letters, he compares what *we* do to what *God* did for us in Jesus Christ. **When God was deeply and continually hurt by humanity's actions and inaction, by our outright sins and subtle rejection, instead of distancing, God came closer to us.** The Creator initiated a discovery mission to see what it was to *be* us, dwelling in fragile skin and a fearful society. God sought reconciliation through incarnation.

So God came close to us in birth with all the vulnerabilities of an infant moving into adulthood. God came close to us doing meaningful work, healing and teaching, experiencing blessings, betrayal, pain, and the cross! God came close to us even *after* death, a Savior still alive and as close to us as breathing.

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul?

This is amazing grace. So amazing that it challenges me. Are *we* to come close to those that hurt us too? To stop counting and forgive seventy-times seven? What about staying with those that are *not* repentant, or those that are violent? Should we just put up with unjust, evil systems? No! I for one am not saying that you and I ought to let others walk all over us, nor do I think is Jesus. I am not commanding us to make peace without any regard for the danger, the cost, or the precedent. But I marvel at those who, like Jesus, make it to reconciliation through process and prayer! Surely, given the example of God through Christ, **you and I, as the church, should at least let God come closer and keep the door open** to God's ministry of reconciliation through us.

This is God's amazing grace. **So amazing that it comforts me to remember that God is coming close to us now**, in *today's* dangers, troubles, and snares. God is coming close, just as we are, at odds with others and ourselves. Where there is division, racism, and injustice, God is coming close to us. Where there is violence and hatred, God comes close. Where there is materialism, greed, poverty, and environmental pain, God comes closer. It gives me hope and energy to know that **God is not counting all this against us, enabling us instead to count on God's grace.**

The closing scene of *Places in the Heart* takes place in the church. We see the estranged couple sitting next to each other in the front pew, but stiffly. We watch their faces as the minister reads about love from 1 Corinthians 13, and the wife softens. Slowly and deliberately, she reaches out her hand to take hold of his. It's a start.

¹J. Paul Sampley, "Second Corinthians," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press).

It's a communion Sunday in that church as it is here today. After the couple shares the bread and the cup with each other, we see how communion moves through the pews, and suddenly, surprisingly, and magically, *other* characters from the story are sitting there too, passing the body and blood of Christ to one another. Those that have been at a distance from God take and eat of the bread and drink of the cup in reconciliation: **God coming close.**