

NOW
A Sermon On: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13 and Mark 4:35-41
Father's Day
June 21, 2009
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See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ...

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours.

Why is it that we have such a hard time changing the things in our lives that we know we need to change? I see it all the time. The other day a person came in to the office wanting to, “see the pastor.” This person had no connection to our church, but something prompted him to stop in and seek counsel. These encounters are always a challenge for me. First of all, once I get settled into a day I find it annoying that someone or something might divert me from my agenda. That is my personal confession for this morning. I am not happy with this character flaw in me. I need an abundance of forgiveness in this regard.

The visitor settled in to tell me the detailed story of his situation. He appeared to be what some might call a hard living person. He was recently released from jail. He was thinking he ought to try to get his GED. He needed to find work – it was a requirement of his parole. He had connected up with his old buddies, and he thought that maybe they were a bad influence. After a time of laying out his story he asked, “What do you think pastor? What should I do?”

I worked hard to keep my hands folded in front of me and a neutral look to my face. My inner voice was shouting, “What should you do? Are you kidding? It does not

take someone with two master degrees to figure this out. Stay away from your old friends. Get a job – any job you can. Complete your GED and don't violate the conditions of your parole.” That was my inner voice. My outer voice – the voice that he could hear said, “I'm glad you stopped in today. What do you think you should do?”

He continued. “I need a job. I found a job, but I was late two days in a row because my buddy didn't show up to give me a ride. I got fired. I'm gonna get my GED, but I'm no good at studying and I need the time to look for work. My buddies like to drink a lot and that is no good for me, but they are my friends and I can't walk away from my friends.” For everything that he knew he should do he had a reason as to why he could not do it.

Before I go too far down the road of a Pharisee and pass judgment upon this surprise visitor let me tell you that the difference between him and me lies only in the details of our circumstances. I've never been in jail and I do not have to worry about the requirements of parole. My friends are not a threat to my well being. My formal education is rather extensive and even if you want to fire me, the Bishop has to put me somewhere. But I really need to work harder at staying healthy. I ought to eat better food and a lot less of it. I've been trying to be better at managing our finances, but exercise is hard to fit into a busy day, and eating ice cream soothes my spirit after a tough day, and managing finances requires that I forgo things I really want. I am confident that I will get better at these things, but right now is not the time.

It trivializes the Gospel to suggest that God, as revealed in Jesus the Christ, is the source of cosmic will power allowing us to overcome our emotional inertia and do the things we always knew we needed to do. We fall into this trap all of the time. I do not

deny the spiritual strength needed to be good stewards of our lives. I just happen to believe that God has more important things to do than worry about my weight or balance my checkbook. Paul is talking about a much more profound split that Jesus came to heal. Paul is talking healing the division between our outer and our inner lives. He calls this reconciliation and he rightly observes that the first reconciliation required is our reconciliation with God.

The New Interpreter's Bible puts it this way: Reconciliation is at the heart of life's business. If the most important single factor about any of our lives is God's having reconciled us to God's very self, then the proper celebration of our reconciliation is to share it with others by fostering reconciliation and atonement wherever and whenever we can. The acceptable time, the day of salvation of which Paul speaks is not the moment you or I get off our duff and start to do the things we know full well we ought to do. The acceptable time is when we finally learn that we can step out of the idolatry of this world and be reunited with the God who loves us and gives us life. Reconciliation as a ground of life would mean that rather than lecture my struggling visitor about personal responsibility, I might find a way to remind him that he too is a child of God no less than me or you.

When Paul spoke these words to the people of Corinth he was speaking to a fractured community. The Corinthians were deep into asserting their spiritual superiority over one another. The acceptable day of which Paul speaks must be understood in this context. You can hear it in his words:

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours.

Paul is arguing that now is the time to drop their spiritual pretentiousness and to stand together in the abundance of God's reconciling love.

Renewal of life need not wait upon the resolution of life's problems. Paul's is a way of thinking about life as being governed or defined not by what is happening around us—or even to our bodies—but by what God is doing from the inside; by what is happening in our hearts.

Now is the acceptable time for each and every one of us to look at life differently. After Christ's death and resurrection, we now regard all people as children of God, not just those of whom we approve. Listen to the text. It says no one. So even unbelievers must be considered and related to differently now because Christ has died for them, whether they have responded to that death-for-them or not. All of our relationships, with everyone, must be governed by the fact that Christ has died for all; because of that death, they are valued and must be treated accordingly.

It trivializes the Gospel to suggest that God, as revealed in Jesus the Christ, is the source of cosmic will power allowing us to overcome our emotional inertia and do the things we always knew we needed to do. God has a larger concern – a concern that moved God to send his only Son. The purpose of that incarnation is nothing less than humanities' reconciliation to God as demonstrated in Jesus' sacrifice upon the cross. That is what I meant two weeks ago when I told you that life is a cross cultural appointment. Life as God intended it is a life lived by the culture of the cross; a life lived in close connection to the love of God. A life that is offered to all of humanity – no matter how hard a person might live.

2 Corinthians 6:1 - 13 (NRSV)

¹As we work together with him, ²we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ³For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ⁴We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁵but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁶beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁷by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁸truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁹in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ¹⁰as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹¹as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. ¹²We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. ¹³There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. ¹⁴In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

Mark 4:35 - 41 (NRSV)

³⁵On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, **“Let us go across to the other side.”** ³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, **“Peace! Be still!”** Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, **“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”** ⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”