

**Sunday, July 1, 2012**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

*We continue our study of Paul's letters today with the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians. This letter is somewhat disjointed, leading scholars to debate whether it is a compilation of fragments of letters, or several distinct letters combined into one.*

*It contains appeals, exhortations, rebukes, threats, attacks, counterattacks, self-defense, self-praise and irony.*

*It is written after Paul has sent both Timothy and Titus to Corinth as ambassadors. The major issue they are confronting is the teachings of 'false apostles' visiting Corinth.*

*What we do know is that the letters back and forth to Corinth helped give form and substance to Paul's theology.*

*The reading is from Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to the Corinthians 5:14-21.*

### **Sermon – “Ambassadors for Christ”**

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Well, I have survived my week at Silver Lake.

It was an interesting juxtaposition to be studying Paul's attempts to keep all of his fledgling communities together while watching the staff and volunteers at camp work to build small groups of people into communities.

The communities at Silver Lake are built around interests and age – so you have forty twelve year olds who are interested in Harry Potter, 35 fourth graders who are first-time campers, forty 15 year olds who are interested in writing and music, a group of high school students playing 'survivor' and a dozen counselors in training.

In addition to the five groups of campers, you have the kitchen staff, the activities staff, the facilities staff, the waterfront staff and the administration – all grouped as small communities, living and working together.

The remarkable thing about this structure – really the same one Paul used – is that most of the time it works.

Relationships are formed, values are explored, communities flourish.

All of the challenges that we faced with our campers mirror those that Paul faced in his communities.

You realize quickly that to be heard and understood, the message must be clear, direct and relevant to the lives of your listeners.

One of my responsibilities as chaplain was to offer a 3-5 minute morning devotional at breakfast.

So I had this great idea about reading a psalm that dealt with nature and then encouraging the young people to reflect on that message during the day.

I explored different translations to find one that I thought would be most accessible to the group.

The first day, there was a problem with the lights on the stage so I couldn't see the psalm to read it – so I paraphrased it.

The second day I read a psalm in traditional form, then paraphrased it and then asked the campers to do something related to that psalm during the day.

I realized that I wanted them to hear scripture as something different than what they might be used to, understand it in their own language and have a way to apply it to their daily lives.

The third day, I chose the parts of the psalm that were particularly relevant and read those, explained what they meant and then related it to our life at camp.

God was most cooperative in my choice of the nature theme.

We had wild thunderstorms, beautiful sunshine, abundant clouds, chilly nights, hot and cold days. We really had everything except snow!

So, helping the campers understand that nature is one way that we see the grandeur of God's power was not a hard task.

They were living it. I just pointed it out.

This is the same thing that Paul tried to do for his early followers.

He wanted them to understand the tradition of the Torah and God's relationship with humanity as well as embracing the teachings Jesus Christ.

He used the context of their own lives to bring his lessons to life.

Paul's understanding of Israel, the church and ministry were part of the larger story of God's dealing with the world.

His core convictions, which were the foundation of all of his work, were developed through experience with the early churches.

Scholar Brad Braxton identifies Paul's four core convictions as:

1. The Christ event is central for understanding God's plan for the world;
2. Christians are people of a new age who still live in an old age;
3. To live as people of the new age requires access to new power: The Holy Spirit;
4. The Torah, and especially its mandate for circumcision, is not binding for Gentiles.

Let's take a look at these:

First, the Christ event – for Paul, the true and living God worshiped in Judaism had acted in Jesus Christ to save the world – as attested to in our reading this morning.

We can't be Christians without understanding and embracing the importance of Jesus Christ.

In Paul's world, worship of Jesus Christ was an extension of the monotheistic belief in God.

God had made himself known to humanity through the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Just as I pointed to nature to teach the children of God's power, Paul pointed to the life of Jesus as an extension of his profound belief in God.

Only God Almighty would have the power to place Jesus Christ among us.

The second core conviction is that Christians are people of a new age who still live in an old age.

Braxton tells us that the "segmenting of time into two ages was a common motif in Jewish eschatology."

Eschatology refers to teachings about the end of time.

Paul's followers were living in a time of Roman occupation and persecution.

They were, of course, hoping for a new time.

Paul used the resurrection event as the pivotal point between the two ages: the age of sin and decay and the dawn of a new age of love and peace.

Third, to live as people of the new age requires access to new power the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is a power that is available to us today.

If you want to change your life, if you want to move from the old to the new, the Holy Spirit will help you do that.

Just paying attention to the movement of the Spirit in your life, will usher you into a new time.

Once you have opened your heart to God's presence, there is no turning back.

When you embrace the power of God in your life, you will be changed, transformed, new.

Fourth, the Torah, and especially its mandate for circumcision, is not binding for Gentiles.

For us, today, this translates into our UCC motto, "Wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

This is one of Paul's important legacies, the saving grace of Jesus Christ is available to all –there are no litmus tests or doctrinal requirements.

All God asks of you is an open heart and an open mind.

Core convictions are fundamental principles or beliefs one takes for granted.

They are the deeply held assumptions from which one argues and on which other beliefs are based.

As ambassadors for Christ, Paul's followers understood his core convictions and carried that message out to the larger community.

At Silver Lake the core conviction is captured in one sentence: "When you are here we ask you to Love Yourself, Love Your Neighbor and Love God."

It really does all come down to that doesn't it?

Isn't this the message that we should be carrying out to the community as ambassadors for Christ?

Let's take a few moments to ask ourselves:

- Are Paul's core convictions still sustaining Christians today?
- What are your core convictions?
- Is it hard to live by those?
- Does your faith help you?