**Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2017**

**Reconciliation – The Love of Christ Compels Us**

**Preaching Resource: 2 Corinthians 5:14-20**

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***Considerations***

This year, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity falls during the 500th anniversary year of Martin Luther’s presentation of the 95 Theses on October 31, 1517. Many Protestant Christians mark this event as the beginning of the Reformation. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has chosen to commemorate this anniversary using the theme “Liberated by God’s Grace” with three sub-themes: *Creation – Not for Sale*, *Human Beings – Not for Sale*, and *Salvation – Not for Sale*.

Christians variously respond to the very phenomenon of Reformation, and the signal events associated with the 16th century under that title. Some lament it and them, others celebrate the same, while still others see in these the shades of gray that mark our way under the cross – in our present sojourn, wherein “we see in a mirror, dimly.” (1 Cor. 13:12) As the Church prays for unity in this 500th year, it does so in the realization that we cannot divine God’s plans with certainty even while we confess that “we know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.” (Rom. 8:28) Paul’s formulation in no way whitewashes the division and pain associated with this tumultuous time even while it confesses that God brings about good from history coursing with mixed motives, imperfect heroes and pointed fingers.

The LWF has been careful not to use the word “celebrate” with this 500th anniversary but it strikes many that we can celebrate God’s faithfulness in the church catholic, sensing in this fractured and wounded bride its Beloved’s gaze. This latter makes it lovely and so the subject of the adjective “new” in 2 Cor. 5:17, found in the text proposed for consideration on the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity by the Council of Churches in Germany at the invitation of the World Council of Churches. In what follows I explore 2 Cor. 5:14-20, the text supporting this year’s theme, which echoes Pope Francis’ use of this quotation in his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel).

***Text***

Paul’s so-called 2nd Letter to the Corinthians is unlike his first letter to this community in two significant ways. First, it does not have the character of a systematic pastoral response to a series of clear questions, but instead has the push and pull of a passionate appeal. Second, it is not clear to scholars that this is a coherent, whole letter. Scholars variously outline the provenance of this text that argues for the gospel even while it defends the ministry of Paul. It is clear that between the first letter, and this letter (or compilation of letters) lay a situation of conflict that is roughly sketched rather than given in detail. Paul is condemned by his foes as weak, and poor at rhetoric (2 Cor. 10:10). His opponents seem to rely heavily on their Jewish identity to establish credibility (2 Cor. 11:22) and in their confidence proclaim “another Jesus” (2 Cor. 11:4). It is clear that, no matter the genesis of the final version of the letter (whether it be a compilation of various writings, or a single work), what we have before us is finally a masterful literary work that speaks to the concrete needs of the Jerusalem church as more important and pressing than the backbiting and one-upmanship that marked the Corinthian church at that time. Some suggest that work as a whole can be divided in three parts: Paul’s re-establishment of his pastoral bond with the community (Chapters 1-7) in preparation for the collection for the church in Jerusalem (Chapters 8-9) as well as his forthcoming 3rd visit to Corinth (Chapters 10-13). The passage under consideration is in the first of these three sections, and yet it would be a mistake to imagine that this text serves only to assert Paul’s place as leader among the congregation. In fact, Paul’s concern is instead that Jesus’s place as leader and Lord has been usurped by would-be apostles.

The text under consideration begins with the forceful phrase “For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. 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.” (2 Cor. 5:14, 15) Paul locates his ministry under the headship of Christ and so points his readers beyond Paul to behold the one who died for all. This dying for all is what the love of Christ is. Scholars point to a happy ambiguity in this phrase “love of Christ.” On the one hand, it might be interpreted to mean the love I have for Christ, while on the other it might well mean the love Christ has for me. Many concur that Paul intends both, but from a broader reading of his work in this letter and his corpus it becomes clear that Christ’s love for me is the condition for the possibility of my love for Christ, and so precedes it (cf. especially Rom. 5:10).

The passage that follows sketches the contours of this love of Christ. From verse 16 we are told that we no longer apprehend anyone “according to the flesh”(κατὰσάρκα). Readers will be mindful that the flesh (σαρξ) is not for Paul the body per se, but a way of being in the world which is self-centred (cf. Rom. 7:14: σάρκινος). By contrast we now know neither Christ nor others in this way. Instead, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” (2 Cor. 5:17) The Greek of this text is stark and sparse: “So if anyone in Christ: new creation.” It is given to the translator to supply the verbs. Readers may remember the text being translated so that the new creation refers specifically to the believer (he or she is a new creation), while the NRSV takes the translation in a slightly different direction (“there is a new creation”). The NRSV carries through the implication of Christ’s work beyond the scope of the believers alone in that the whole world is made new. This seems to be picked up in verse 19 where we read “in Christ, God was reconciling the world (κόσμον) to himself.” Of course, such a cosmic scope of redemption would include the individual believer and so both senses of “creation” are valid.

Paul follows up his word of new creation with the affirmation that “everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.” (2 Cor. 5:17b). This is a most interesting confession when we read the text in the shadow of the history of Paul’s interaction with the Corinthians: old wounds festered still and battles refused even a truce, never mind peace. Theologians, for this reason, interpret Paul’s language here eschatologically. It seems that the all-encompassing love of Christ is already/not yet effective in the world. Believers live in this tension and experience in it the hope that does not disappoint us since it is given us by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:1-5). But how are we to live in this tension? In the passages that follow, Paul speaks eloquently of the ministry (τὴνδιακονίαν) and the message (τὸνλόγον) of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18, 19). This reconciliation is first grounded in the action of God, the first Agent of reconciliation. All reconciliation, then, is grounded in God’s initial activity in Christ, and yet we are not unimportant in this activity since “we are ambassadors for Christ.” (2 Cor. 5:20) This latter sentence is a simple verbal phrase in Greek (Ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦοὖν πρεσπεύομεν). The verb is related to the noun “presbyter,” and so presumes that ministry entails a certain gravitas by virtue of our experience of and in Christ. Those who engage in the ministry of reconciliation, then, know intimately of it and by virtue of this are compelled despite powers to the contrary.

***Context***

Contemporary readers in Canada of this text, with its focus on reconciliation, cannot but think of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that has most recently completed its work and prepared a list of 94 recommendations for working toward right relations between Settler and Indigenous peoples in Canada. Beyond this, people will remember the TRC of South Africa, as well as contemporary uses of this word in politics, the family, church, etc. During the Week of Prayer for Christian unity in the Canadian context, Paul’s treatment of reconciliation and contemporary uses of this ancient word can mutually inform one another as we think through what it means to be communities of reconciliation on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The phenomenon of Reformation and contemporary ecumenical work, then, might be helpfully illumined by both Paul’s text and the various guises of reconciliation we experience in the church and beyond.

A hard truth that persists as we read 2 Cor. 5:14-20 is that our perception of a new creation is fractured by both the injustice suffered by many at the behest of the church and by the seemingly intractable divisions between Christian communities still today. Surely these two phenomena are not unrelated, and we still need to hear Paul’s final call in the text under consideration: “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (2 Cor. 5:20) There will be no reconciliation without peace and no peace without justice, but we hear good news from St. Thomas Aquinas who, in commenting on this text, reminds us that “Christ is justice itself.” Churches, then, not only know of our brokenness and sinfulness but also know the Christ in our midst shaping us into Christ’s image. Christ as justice frames our way of being in the world. Our participation in God’s reconciling work immerses us in new ways of seeing and in working for the newness of both the world and the church in Christ.