

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21
Creekside COB
November 6, 2005

John and Mary Q. Ambassador

Pastors have long known that congregations look forward to the final sermon in a series. It is not because the congregation anxiously awaits the final puzzle piece that will complete the big picture. They look forward to the last sermon because it is the **LAST** sermon!

I'm reminded of the woman who spoke to her pastor after he had completed a laborious seven-week series on the Holy Spirit. She said, "Your sermons have been very meaningful to me. *Each one was better than the next.*" I don't know if her *sermon series assessment* reflects yours. If so, be glad it has only been four weeks and not seven!

I have asked you to reconsider and reconstruct how you think of evangelism. The goal is not asking you to just **THINK** about it, but **DO** something about it. I said that to earn the right to share our faith, we must be people who are safe, who serve, and love. I said the goal of evangelism is conversion and growth of both the receiver **AND** the giver of the message. Learning goes both directions. Last Sunday I said evangelists are dance instructors who help people "*tune into*" and dance to the music of God's love playing in their hearts. We are to be "everyday ambassadors." Evangelism is not a technique. It is a lifestyle lived in the context of everyday relationships. If you are a good friend, a neighbor, and a descent human being, you have the qualifications to be an ambassador in the service of Jesus Christ.

Returning from our October fishing trip in Wisconsin, we drove ninety miles out of our way to visit the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Museum in Wausau. It houses the largest collection of bird art in the world, featuring works by the world's premiere wildlife

artists including Robert Bateman and Roger Torey Peterson who, by the way, was a classmate of Bill Paff's at Cornell.

As we walked through the beautifully landscaped grounds, past large bronze sculptures of geese and whooping cranes, my buddy Joe recited museum facts he gleaned from the Internet. There was just one bit of information he overlooked—the museum hours. On the door was a sign: “CLOSED MONDAY.”

As we lambasted Joe, he noticed a doorbell. “*Let me give it a try,*” he said. He rang it and a woman came to the door. I said, “This will be a repeat of the scene in the Wizard of Oz where Dorothy and her friends knock at the door to the Emerald Palace. She says to the doorman, “If you please, sir, we want to see the Wizard right away.” He replies, “The Wizard? Nobody can see the Great Oz.”

Joe gave a hat-in-hand sob story to the door lady. “We are three Indiana hicks who heard wonderful things about your museum. We’re headed home and we drove 100 miles out of our way to visit... but you’re closed. Is there any way we might take a little peek?” The lady smiled and said, “*How can I say no to a story like that?*” She paged security to turn on the lights, and for the next two hours we had the museum to ourselves.

Driving home, I reflected on what had happened. She could have said, “Look, pal--rules are rules. We’re closed today, no exceptions!” Instead, this hospitable woman read our forlorn, unshaven faces, listened to our story, and made an exception to the rule. It was a way of saying, “*What’s ours is yours... enjoy.*” The Woodson Museum has a fine ambassador.

If more churches could only be like this. Far too many resemble museums exhibiting music and modes of operation that are relics of the past. To get in you must follow the prescribed procedures. I don't want to be associated with a church like this.

I want to be part of a church that is beautiful in its openness, it's hospitality, and it's atmosphere that is permeated with the love of Jesus. It's the kind of church required to be an agent of

change in the world. It takes a particular kind of Christian to usher people to a new way of living, and I know this is the kind of church you want to be.

An ambassador is a representative of one government to another. He or she represents a higher authority and is commissioned to speak on behalf of that authority. In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul declared that planet earth had been invaded. A new life form emerged when ordinary individuals came into contact with Jesus. This invasive species forever changed the way the world conducted business. *“Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation,”* Paul said. *“The old is extinct and the new has arrived.”* Jesus bridged the gulf between God and humanity. Through Jesus, we are reconciled to God. People take this to mean different things. It is making things right between you and God. It is being saved, pardoned, and destined for heaven.

But this isn't all there is to it. The reconciled—these new creations are now reconcilers. Paul declared, *“We are ambassadors for Christ, and God is making his appeal through us.”* I like the way Brian McLaren says it. God wasn't interested in creating a super strain of religious people. Before Jesus, there were two kinds of people on earth-- the irreligious and the religious. God created a new people, who, unlike the irreligious, loved God, and unlike the religious, loved the irreligious. This new breed of humanity was called healers.

Christ's ambassadors aren't a religious goon squad that threatens people into conversion. Ambassadors have been blessed by God to be a blessing to those who come into contact with them. Their message is not about condemnation. They spread the word that in Christ there is no condemnation. Imagine the good things that can happen when, armed with the love, peace, and reconciliation of Jesus, we become blessings to people. Imagine what could happen if Creekside got the reputation of being a church-full of healers and reconcilers.

You are friends, neighbors, and all-around decent people. You already have ambassadorial credentials. All you need to do is to keep some basic thoughts in mind. When someone is appointed

to serve as an ambassador to another country, she must go to that country to live. She cannot be the United States Ambassador to Madagascar and live in Milwaukee. If this is obvious, why is it that the ambassadors that Jesus calls to go into all the world are holed-up in the church?

The operative word for ambassadors is, “relational.” In the Church of the Brethren we believe that leading people to Christianity is a group project. No one comes to Jesus apart from a brother or sister. This means we need to get out more often. In the church we love each other. We love being together. We are each other’s best friends. But too much of a good thing presents a problem—how are non-Christians going to know who Christians are if we are stuck together like Velcro?

We need to get out more often. If all our friends are church friends, we need to make unchurched friends. How? Not by being religious, but by being ourselves. By having a friendly conversation with the waitress who refills your coffee cup. By walking across the street to welcome the family that just moved in. By being kind and considerate to the lady at the checkout counter who has served 100 customers with conversations that is limited to, “Cash or credit?” and, “Do you have any coupons?”

We need to get out more often. Volunteer at the hospital. Coach a Little League team. Take cooking classes. Be a regular customer at a popular coffee house. Get involved at the kid’s school. Host a “get-acquainted-with-you-next-door-neighbor” dinner. Go where the people are. Don’t make a production of it. Keep it simple. Keep it sincere.

Ambassadors of Jesus are relational. Second, they know the meaning of people’s stories. Several years ago on the last day of a fishing trip I had a conversation with a guy who was a first time guest at Dalen’s Resort. He asked how long I had been going there and why I kept returning. He had come from Iowa with his wife. “*How did you hear about Dalen’s?*” I asked. He had visited his aunt in Indiana who gave him a resort brochure. Someone in her church did a lot of fishing. When she mentioned

that her nephew loved to fish, but never found a good place to go, the man gave her the brochure. "I'm glad we checked it out. We've had a great time."

"Where in Indiana is your aunt from?" I asked. "South Bend." "You say someone in her church gave it to her." "Yea. Come to think of it, it was her pastor." "Your aunt's name wouldn't happen to be Alta Marburger, would it?" I asked. His eyes got big as saucers. "How in the world do you know that?" I said, "I'm the pastor who gave her the brochure."

Unexpected things happen we people tell stories about their lives, their loves, the things which inspire them and give their lives meaning. When people share what's important to them, whether they know it or not, they are touching upon the story that God wants to tell in their lives. When we engage in telling our stories, the Holy Spirit finds incredible ways of making connections that lead both people down a common path.

Ambassadors look for ways to relate to people and listen to their stories. Ambassadors also work in tandem with other Christians. Most people aren't drawn to Christianity because they have read literature or have accepted convincing arguments. They need to see living, breathing examples of people who live and love and laugh and cry in the thick and thin of life. Most people are visual learners who are drawn not by what we SAY, but by what they SEE.

Bringing someone to church with you may not be the most important first step. Instead, introduce them to members of your church family. Let them see how you relate to each other. Let them see the definitive difference that our faith makes in our relationships with each other. Hopefully they will see something that leads them to say, "I want to be part of a community like that."