Do you consider yourself as an ambassador for Christ? Do you believe it is your calling to present God to others and invite them to become a disciple of Jesus Christ? Do you see the church as an outpost of God’s love and justice in a territory that is hostile or indifferent to the good news? Think of that: the church is the embassy of heaven! When you walk through these doors you are leaving the community of nations behind. Within these walls, different laws apply: the law of love, not the law of coercion; the law of justice, not the laws of “might makes right”; the law of service to others, not the law of “looking out for number one.”

That is what the church is supposed to be, anyway. Not every church lives up to that ideal, and no church lives up to it all the time. The church is just as much a human institution as it is divine. It has more than its share of faults and foibles. Paul knows that as well as anyone. Paul’s Corinthian letters are exercises in conflict resolution, as he seeks to cultivate the gift of unity in a deeply divided congregation; but Paul never abandons that ideal of the embassy of heaven or of his fellow Christians servants as its ambassadors.

Whether you think of yourself an ambassador for Christ or not, you surely are! We started training for that calling the day we were baptized. We are still in training, of course, because growing into the full stature of Christ is a lifelong task; but being the member of a Christian church means we are representatives of the God we serve. We come and go, shuttling between this faith family and the community outside these walls. We travel freely in the world, rubbing elbows with Christians and non-Christians alike. Everywhere we go, we can expect to be viewed as Christ’s ambassadors, whether we like it or not.

There is an old story about a pastor, new to town, who got onto a public bus, paid his fare, got his change, and sat down. Looking at the change, the pastor realized he had received an extra 25-cents. He thought to himself, “Should I say something or let it slide? It’s only 25-cents after all; who would notice?” Deciding to do the “right” thing, the pastor approached the driver and returned the 25-cents. The driver said to the pastor, “I knew who you were when you got on the bus. I wanted to see if you practiced what you preached and if you really were a disciple of Jesus. Now, I’m convinced. I’ll be in church on Sunday.” Getting off the bus, the pastor prayed, “Forgive me Jesus, I almost sold you out for 25-cents.” For the pastor to act differently would mean to misrepresent Jesus to the bus driver.

The only way some people will experience the love of God, in Jesus Christ, is if disciples like us demonstrate it for them. Every word we speak and everything we do will be judged by the world; as ambassadors for Christ, people will judge him and his gospel by our behavior. The work of being an ambassador for Christ is crucially important in our culture as it becomes increasingly more unchurched and more hostile to Christian values. What we do, or fail to do, in our human interactions will make a difference.

Occasionally, we hear stories of people who get it right, who manage, by the way they live their lives, to offer a glimpse of what heaven must be like. Such a witness famously happened in 2006, in a little Amish village known as Nickel Mines, in Lancaster County, PA. A deranged man from outside the Amish community walked into the village’s one-room schoolhouse with a gun and took a group of children hostage. A little while later, he shot and killed five young girls and wounded five others. Then the gunman took his own life.

The world watched to see how the elders of this committed pacifist community would respond. What the world saw was a remarkable Christian witness. The Amish community reached out to the gunman’s widow and children, bringing them food, and raising money to help the family pay their bills. “We have to forgive,” an Amish woman told a reporter, matter-of-factly. “We have to forgive him in order for God to forgive us.”

This contrasts sharply with the sort of thing we typically see in the news after a shooting. We often see family members of victims sitting in the courtroom, determined to see justice done, obsessed with making sure the perpetrator gets the harshest sentence allowed under the law. They tell the reporters that they want “closure,” which is their right, as victims of a crime. The Amish idea of closure is evidently very different from most Americans, perhaps because the Amish, in some ways, do not live in our country. More than most Americans, their humble community is an embassy of heaven.

A pastor from the region told of sitting in the kitchen of the gunman’s family a short time after the shootings. There was a knock on the door. It was an Amish man who said he had come on behalf of his community. That burly farmer walked right up to the gunman’s father, put his arms around him, and hugged him. He said, simply, “We will forgive you.” He and his community were as good as their word. Reflecting on the experience later, the awestruck pastor concluded: “God met us in that kitchen.”2

There are as many ways to be an ambassador of Christ as there are people in the world. Once in a great while there may come the opportunity for a spectacular witness like that of the Amish farmer, but more often, what we have is a multitude of small opportunities to bear witness in word or deed. Our manner of life, loving our kids, helping a neighbor, donating to the Food Shelf, pounding nails for Habitat, mentoring a student, sending a card, or making a call are vitally important acts of kindness.

Such silent witness is powerful. Actions often do speak louder than words; but sometimes there is no substitute for words. Palm Sunday and Easter are fast approaching, two days when a high percentage of people who do not have much connection with a church will attend worship. Maybe they will come on their own, but they are more likely to come if they receive a thoughtful invitation from an ambassador like you, inviting them to the embassy gala to hear the good news about Jesus.

There is a higher purpose to this, of course, and not just a shameless plug to fill the pews on Easter Sunday. After identifying himself and his co-workers as ambassadors for Christ, Paul says, “we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be *reconciled* to God.” Whether our friends or neighbors make it to worship in the next couple of weeks is not the point. Getting here is just a means to an end. We are inviting them, ultimately, not to walk into a building, but to be reconciled to God, to respond to our Savior’s gracious invitation to make their way back home after far too much time spent wandering.

Reflecting on this passage, Bible scholar N. T. Wright writes: “The world has never before seen a ministry of reconciliation; it has never before heard a message of reconciliation. No wonder the Corinthians found Paul’s work hard to fathom. It didn’t fit any preconceived ideas they may have had. He was behaving like someone who lived in a whole new world. This new world has a new king, and the king has ambassadors. Paul is not offering a new philosophy, though his message makes robust philosophical sense in its own way. He is not inviting people to try out a new religious experience, though anyone who believes his gospel will have experiences they had never imagined. He is going into all the world with a message from its newly enthroned sovereign, a message inviting anyone and everyone to be reconciled to the God who made them, loves them, and has provided the means of reconciliation for them to come back to know and love him in return.” We proclaim a Gospel of love through a ministry of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. I invite you to accept your calling as an ambassador for Christ, to share the joy of living into God’s new world.

Prayer: **God, we thank you that we have a place in you, and not the world. Help us Lord, to be better disciples of Jesus and better ambassadors for his gospel of love, grace, mercy, and peace. Help us live lives more pleasing to you, and not worry about pleasing, or being a part of this world. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.**

**Sources:**

* William Barclay*, Daily Study Bible, The Letters to the Corinthians* (Westminster, 1975).
* Lori Van Ingen and Jennifer Todd, “Community joins in grief, prayer for victims, gunman of West Nickel Mines School shooting,” *Lancaster Online,* October 4, 2006.
* N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 2004), 65-66.

**The Embassy of Heaven**

Sunday, March 27, 2022  [2 Corinthians 5:16-21](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Corinthians+5%3a16-21&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Drive down Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, D.C., and you see large, stately mansions. Architectural styles vary widely from one building to the next, but those grand houses all have one thing in common: a colorful flag flying out in front. That section of Massachusetts Avenue is known as “Embassy Row.” Each of those buildings is an embassy: the sovereign territory of another nation, embedded there in the capital of the U.S.

Entering one of those embassies means leaving the jurisdiction of the United States. The idea of national sovereignty is a time-honored principle which is respected all over the world. Even in times of terrible political turmoil, the embassy of other nations is generally protected. Case in point: as Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest, Hungary in 1956, the staunchly anti-Communist Roman Catholic cardinal, József Mindszenty, took refuge in the American Embassy. He lived there for 15 years while the Communist secret police waited to arrest him if he ventured outside; but they dared not violate the sanctity of the embassy to seize him, for he was under the personal protection of the American ambassador.

One exception: “the October Surprise,” when radical Iranian students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran (October 1979), taking 52 embassy staffers hostage and holding them without trial for 444 days. It was a scandalous breach of international law, and part of the reason why the United States still does not have diplomatic relations with Iran. If you transgress the invisible boundary that sets an embassy apart as a little piece of sovereign territory, there are consequences.

I mention this to explain something Paul says:“*So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us*” (2 Cor. 5:20). The “we,” of course, refers to Paul and his co-workers, but it just as easily applies to all Christians, because representing Christ to the world is something we are all called to do. William Barclay explains that when the Romans created a new province in The Empire, ambassadors played a key role. The army would conquer a territory, a military governor would rule it for a while, but ultimately the Roman Senate would dispatch a team of 10 ambassadors to the region. It would be the job of those 10 people “[to determine] the boundaries of the new province, [to draw] up a constitution for its new administration, and then [return] to submit what they [have] done for ratification by the senate. They [would be] the men responsible for bringing others into the family of the Roman Empire.”1 Similarly, Paul brings to others the good news about Jesus, so they can choose to be citizens of God’s Kingdom, members of God’s family.