Sermon Series: The Four Building Blocks of Our Faith
Sermon Title: The Lifeblood of the Church

Text: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 -- Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Introduction: On Sunday, March 2nd of this year, hundreds of Hollywood "stars" gathered together for the Academy Awards at the **Dolby Theater in Las Angeles**. Very few, if any, "**slipped in the back door**", if you know what I mean. Instead, virtually every one of them made a grand entrance. ***They stepped out of their stretch limos, and walked down the long red carpet, smiling at the cameras and waving to their fans, each of whom had to undergo a lengthy application process and background check to see their favorite movie stars***. Meanwhile, the actors and actresses showed off their designer clothing, chatted with reporters, and went to great lengths, **all for the sole purpose of being noticed and adored**.

Contrast that scene with the public ministry of Jesus. For the most part, He consistently sought anonymity rather than acclaim. That's why He said to the man He healed of leprosy in **Matthew 8,** "**See that you don't tell anyone**." And to the two blind men He healed in **Matthew 9**, the Bible says, Jesus "**warned them sternly, 'See that no one knows about this**.'" And once more in **Mark 1**, when a demon-possessed man in Capernaum yelled out "**I know who you are – the Holy One of God!**", Jesus replied, "**Be quiet**!" ***Unlike Hollywood personalities of today, our Lord often chose NOT to be the focus of public attention***. **In fact, most of His ministry deliberately took place outside the capital city of Jerusalem, away from the big pomp and ceremony of the Temple**.

Today is the day we commemorate our Lord's t**riumphal entry** into Jerusalem. **We call it Palm Sunday because the people waved palm branches as Jesus descended the Mount of Olives and entered Jerusalem**. Looking back to a couple of centuries before Christ (160 BC), the waving of palm branches was how the Jews welcomed a great leader named **Judas Maccabeus** into the holy city after he led his family in a successful rebellion against **the Seleucid Empire**. I'm sure this was in the back of the minds of many as they welcomed Jesus. As He approached the city in what would be the last few days of His life, the people took notice and began to hail Him as their **Messiah and King**. **Now, it's worth noting that in Luke 19:39-40, we're told that for the first time, Jesus not only permitted the people to say what they did but refused to quiet the crowds when asked by the Pharisees to do so**.

Of course, this doesn't mean that the crowds, or anyone else for that matter, actually understood what was happening. The people who waved the palm branches were looking for Jesus to throw off their current oppressors, the Romans, and set them free to assume their rightful place in the world as preeminent among the nations. That's why they cried out, "**Hosanna. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.**" The word "**hosanna**" means "**save us**." **Just like Judas Maccabeus had done two hundred years before Christ, they were hoping for a very similar outcome**. When it became apparent that this was not what Jesus was up to, the same crowd was persuaded to call for our Lord's death by crucifixion.

Today, with the benefit of both the Old and New Testament Scriptures, we know that Jesus did, in fact, come to be the Savior of Israel as well as all the nations of the world. **But His plan didn't involve embracing the role**

of a conquering general leading men into battle, but rather as a suffering servant who would offer Himself as a sacrifice for sin on the cross of Calvary.

All of this brings us to our passage for this morning where Paul uses a word to describe what Christ was doing during His first advent into the world. **HE DID NOT COME TO DELIVER ISRAEL FROM THEIR WORLDLY ENEMIES, BUT TO DELIVER MANKIND FROM THE LAST ENEMY, WHICH ACCORDING TO 1 CORINTHIANS 15:26, IS DEATH**. This, He accomplished, through **the ministry of RECONCILIATION**. It means "**to change from enmity to friendship**." The word is used five times in these five verses to help us understand what God was doing when He sent His Son into the world. ***Here are four thoughts that will help you better understand what it means to be reconciled to God***.

WE ARE RECONCILED BY THE WILL OF GOD (**2 Corinthians 5:17-18 – Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation**). One of the great encouragements that we receive when we become followers of Christ is that we have new life in Him! We are born again. We pass from death to life (**See Ephesians 2:1**). We are new creations in Christ. I think of Zacchaeus the tax collector who loved money, but then was transformed when he met Jesus. That's why he said, "**Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount**." I guarantee you no one does that kind of thing unless something has radically changed within him. ***And it's clear from these verses that this is a work of God. He is the reconciler***. "**All this is from God**," we are told. **He, as the offended party** (**Romans 3:23 – for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**), **sets the terms of reconciliation**. By the way, this idea that the God of the Universe would intentionally seek reconciliation with those who have willfully offended Him by ***sacrificing His Son for their sins*** was an outrageous thought **to Jews** (**1 Corinthians 1:23** -- a stumbling block) **and Gentiles** (foolishness). Yet the gospel proclaims that our relationship with God changes ***from one of hostility to friendship*** through the death of His Son, Jesus, on the cross of Calvary in payment for our sins. THE RESULT IS THAT THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN RECONCILED TO GOD RECEIVE THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION. We'll talk more about this in a little bit, but this brings me to a second thought about reconciliation.

WE ARE RECONCILED BY THE ACT OF FORGIVENESS (**2 Corinthians 5:19 -- … in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation**). God is the reconciler. ***We can't earn His forgiveness***. **He chooses to forgive our trespasses so that He will never again hold them against us**. ***Here's what Scripture says***: **Hebrews 10:17 -- "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more**"; **Psalm 103:11-12 -- For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us; Isaiah 43:25 -- "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more**. Do you get it? In Christ, we are completely forgiven of all of our sins – past, present and future. **His one act of sacrifice covers all of our sins so that He never has to die again to bring about our reconciliation to God** (**1 Peter 3:18 -- For Christ died for sins once for all**).

Saying farewell to stuff from our past might be a challenge for some, but not for many New Yorkers who bid a traditional farewell on **December 28th of each year in Times Square** ahead of the big New Year's Eve celebration. At the annual **Good Riddance Day celebration** bad memories are burned – literally. It was originally inspired by a Latin American tradition in which New Year's revelers stuffed dolls with objects representing bad memories before setting them on fire. In Times Square, attendees write down their bad memories on pieces of paper. "COVID," "Cancer," "Our broken healthcare system," "Spam calls and emails," "Bad coffee," and "Single-Use Plastics," were some of the entries. And then every December 28th, this event gives people the opportunity to leave in the past and destroy any unpleasant, unhappy, and unwanted memories – so that they can toss them into an incinerator and watch them vanish. Now listen to this: the

moment you place your faith and trust in Christ, you celebrate a spiritual good riddance day. That's when you recognize that all the garbage in your life, the sin that so easily entangled you has been forgiven, never to be held against you for all eternity. **Why not? Because God no longer counts our trespasses against us**. (***Review: We are reconciled by the will of God; and by the act of forgiveness***.)
Probably he was sent to a labor camp, but even so it's a story of a happy moment in his life.

WE ARE RECONCILED BY THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH (**2 Corinthians 5:20 -- Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God**). God is our reconciler but not apart from our human response to the Gospel. That's why Paul says, "**We implore you…**" The word implore has a stronger force than "**to ask**." It means to **STRONGLY BESEECH**. **It's as if the importance of this decision is weighing heavily on the Apostle**. He understands that every person must decide for himself if he wants to reconciled to God. The Bible says elsewhere, "**As many as received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God**" – **John 1:12**. **Being reconciled to God requires that we respond to His gracious offer of forgiveness and place our trust in Christ**. Given that the alternative is eternal death, you would think that this would be a no-brainer. **Like those commercials for the 30 and over baseball team. The coach is looking for a pinch-hitter and just happens to have Hall of Famer Derek Jeter on his bench. It's pretty obvious that he's going to get the nod**. So, why are men so reluctant to reconcile to God? The answer is that as human beings we love our sin! We choose it over repentance and faith that brings life eternal and abundant. **John 3:19** puts it his way, **This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil**. To be reconciled to God we must first **REPENT** of our sins and then **believe** in Jesus. **This is a deliberate turning from sin, renouncing a desire to seek after anything but the Lord for life**.

Here is a story of repentance and faith. In the days of the Russian revolution, the Soviet state tried to stamp out Christianity and convert everyone to atheism. A popular Russian comedian developed a stage act in which he played a drunken Orthodox priest. Dressed in wine-stained robes, he did a comic imitation of the ancient but beautiful liturgy. Part of his performance was to chant the Beatitudes. But he used distorted words—such as "**blessed are they who hunger and thirst for vodka**" and "**blessed are the cheesemakers**"—while struggling to remain more or less upright. He had done his act time and again and been rewarded by the authorities for his work in promoting atheism and in making worship seem ridiculous. But on one occasion things didn't go as planned. Instead of saying his garbled version of the Beatitudes in his well-rehearsed comic manner, he chanted the sentences as they were actually sung in a real Liturgy. His attention was focused not on the audience but on the life-giving words that were coming from the Bible, words he had learned and sung as a child. He listened to the memorized words and something happened in the depths of his soul. After singing the final Beatitude, he fell to his knees weeping. He had to be led from the stage and never again parodied worship. Probably he was sent to a labor camp, but even so it's a story of a happy moment in his life. He had begun a new life in a condition of spiritual freedom that no prison could take away. Whatever his fate, he brought the Beatitudes and his recovered faith with him. **Truly, the Bible can change one's life if we want it to**. (***Review: We are reconciled by the will of God; by the act of forgiveness; and by the obedience of faith***.)

WE ARE RECONCILED BY THE WORK OF SUBSTITUTION (**2 Corinthians 5:21 -- For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God**). God justifies the ungodly by punishing Christ in our place. This is called the "**substitutionary atonement**." Christ did not become a sinner for us. Otherwise, it makes no sense why He would call out on the cross, "**My God, My God. Why has Thou forsaken, Me**?" It would have been clear to Jesus that God was forsaking Him because He was a sinner. But He wasn't. Paul says, "**God made Him who knew no sin to become sin for us**." Here's the plain and simple truth of the Gospel message – "**God treated Jesus on the cross AS IF He lived our lives, and now treats us AS IF we had lived His life**." God unleashed the full fury of His wrath upon our Lord so that we would not have to face it in the final judgment. So, we read in **Isaiah 53:5-6**, "**But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was**

crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

In **2 Corinthians 5**, we read that **all Christians are reconciled to God and then given the responsibility of representing Him to the world**. This is called being an '**ambassador**.' The word means, "**A diplomatic official of the highest rank sent by one country to another as its representative**". Our motivation for this duty stems from knowing that our works, as members of the body of Christ, will be judged in the future (**2 Corinthians 5:10-11 -- For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. 11 Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others**). So, we join with Paul, and out of reverence for God, we attempt to persuade men to be reconciled to God. **That's what it means to be an ambassador for Christ. Here are three things you need to know about this role**:

- **An AMBASSADOR officially represents a foreign sovereign**. Our citizenship is in heaven according to **Philippians 3:20**. We live under the authority of the Lord God Almighty (**See Jude 25**) and serve Him alone (**Revelation 1:6 -- He has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father — to him be glory and power for ever and ever**). He is our King.
- **An AMBASSADOR temporarily lives in an alien land**. For the moment, we live as aliens and strangers in the world (**See 1 Peter 2:11**). We're confident, however, that God will call us home (**Philippians 3:14 -- I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus**). When our work here is done, we'll go to be with the Lord in heaven.
- **An AMBASSADOR speaks what he's commanded**. An ambassador is never free to speak whatever is on his mind. Because he speaks on behalf of a foreign king, he must speak what He is told to. For you and me, and every believer in this world, we are commanded to speak the message of the gospel – Be reconciled to God!

Conclusion: ***Review: We are reconciled by the will of God; by the act of forgiveness; by the obedience of faith; and by the work of substitution***.

In her **book *Living Beyond Yourself: Exploring the Fruit of the Spirit***, author and speaker **Beth Moore** recalls a particularly insightful moment in her life: I will never forget watching an evening talk show featuring the story of the parents and killer of a young college student. The killer was his best friend. The weapon was **high alcohol content inside a speeding automobile**. … What made this particular feature prime-time viewing? The parents had forgiven the young driver… And if that was not enough, they had taken him in as their own. This young man sat at the table in the chair which was once occupied by their only son. He slept in the son's bed. He worked with the victim's father, teaching seminars on safety. He shared their fortune and supported their causes. He spoke about the one he had slain in ways only someone who knew him intimately could have. … Why did these parents do such a thing? Because it gave them peace. The interviewer was amazed; I was amazed. I kept trying to put myself in the parents' position—but I could not. Then, as the tears streamed down my cheeks, I heard the Spirit of God whisper to my heart and say: "**No wonder you cannot relate. You have put yourself in the wrong position. You, my child, are the driver**." **God was the parent who not only forgave, but also invited me to sit at His table in the space my Savior left for me. As a result, I have peace**. THIS IS WHAT RECONCILIATION IS ALL ABOUT. ***In Christ God was reconciling the world (including each one of us) to himself, not counting our trespasses against us. And once we have been reconciled to Him, we are entrusted with the message of reconciliation***.