

## Old Turtle, God's Appeal, and the Whole Truth

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
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*II Corinthians 5:16-21*

As I cast about for the right scripture passage to pair with *Old Turtle and the Broken Truth*, it occurred to me that the Apostle Paul in II Corinthians knew a little something about what makes the broken truth whole. When we have only part of the truth about ourselves and others, that's not enough for the world to be healed, or for people to be reconciled to God and to one another. Listen now for what Paul's words to the church at Corinth—which was situated in the middle of a cruel world and had some discord even with its own ranks—might have to say about the truth, the whole truth.

*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who **reconciled us to himself through Christ**, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. **So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us**; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

I love the story of *Old Turtle and the Broken Truth*.<sup>i</sup> The truth breaking apart into two pieces when it came to earth. A piece of it, glittering, attracting the attention of different creatures. How the Crow and the other animals realized that while it was pretty and while it was important, it wasn't whole and then discarded that shard in search of something more. How the humans found the gleaming shard—one human in particular--and then shared it with people who looked like them. And you know, if you hung with the story, that the shard said,—*You are Loved*. They held on to that truth tightly, even went to war over that partial truth, destroying each other and the environment while clinging to that partial truth. Grasping at it, not wanting to let it go, not really knowing that it is not the whole truth.

I love how the little girl goes to Old Turtle to speak of the pain of the world. How she speaks of the earth being sore, people suffering, battles being fought over and over again, people saying it has always been this way and will always be this way.

And I love how Old Turtle tells the little girl about the broken truth and that the broken truth that the people are fighting over is so close to a great whole truth—and that the people need the other part of the truth if the world is to be healed and made whole. And the whole truth is, of course, not only that **You are Loved**, but **So are They**.

The broken truth can only be mended when one person meets another—someone from a different place or with a different face or different ways and sees and hears **herself**—another human being.

I love that story. I love it for its honesty about human brokenness and its honesty about the suffering and pain fighting over a partial truth has caused and still causes. I love it for its hope about human possibility.

I love *Old Turtle* for the way it calls to that deep place in us that longs for healing in the world, that aches for an end to war, that feels compassion for those who are mistreated, that wants things to be made just and right. I love *Old Turtle and the Broken Truth* for the way it says that we need to be able to see that all people are loved—*all people are loved*--and loved *by God*.

I don't know, but I think Old Turtle might just have had the Apostle Paul's ear when the former Pharisee from Tarsus was writing to the church in Corinth about not regarding anyone from a human point of view, and about being reconciled to God, and about how God trusted the message of reconciliation to us. I hear Paul calling **us** to be **ambassadors** for Christ—God making God's appeal **through us**. I think the very heart of that appeal, the essence of it, is Love—not just God's love for you and me and us, but for *any and all* we might consider to be *them*. Especially for *the weakest and most vulnerable*.

I think that little girl who went to see Old Turtle and then left with the other piece of the truth in her pocket began to understand what it means to have God make God's appeal through her. She understood not only that she was loved. She understood that everyone she came into contact with was loved as well.

Now, if you're thinking to yourself, *that's a sweet story and all, but it's a little idealistic...* If you're thinking to yourself, *when are we going to get down to talking about what's going on in the world and what we can do about it?* If you're thinking *that's a sweet story and all but that's just love, love, love, and we need something more than that*, well then maybe what we need to think about is the fact that Paul says that we are called to be ambassadors for Christ. That's our job. We are called to be ambassadors for love embodied in the world.

We live in a world that is not a kind world, not a world that is heading in the right direction.

We live in a world where hateful words get volleyed back and forth. If you do not think the hateful words go both ways then you have not been reading the comments section of on-line articles. I've said it again and again, but why don't I ever internalize it? Never read the comments section! If you read the comments section, you'll find people that you think are on your side—who say they are on your side—being not just impolite or uncivil, but downright nasty and ugly. I guarantee you that you can find that kind of nastiness on both sides of any issue.

We live in a world that is so polarized and polarizing that even to speak of clear injustice and obvious oppression in a pulpit opens you up to being called partisan and political.

We live in a world where parents and children fleeing genuine oppression in countries that are not safe for them are still being separated at our borders and many have not been reunited.

We live in a world where my college friend and pastor colleague Felipe Martinez, a longtime U.S. citizen, has taken to carrying his U.S. passport everywhere he goes—and he lives in Indiana! He carries his passport because ICE raids are happening there all the time, and brown people like him are just naturally presumed to be here illegally.

Oh God, I wish I didn't have to talk about that.

We live in a world—and I mean a larger world, not just here in the U.S.—where it is increasingly dangerous to be a journalist.

We live in a world where all of us, regardless of our political convictions, feel under siege and at odds, like long-held friendships are fraying.

What can we—what can you and I—do in a world like that?

Well, what we can do is what the Apostle Paul said that Christians ought to do—we ought to be ambassadors of the Love that Christ came to embody.

That doesn't mean we avoid speaking hard truths, but that we speak those truths in love and compassion.

What does it mean to be an ambassadors of the Love that Christ came to embody?

It means waking up every day saying, "God is making God's appeal through me today. How might God make God's appeal for what is loving and kind and just and right through me?"

It means praying and seriously asking myself the question, "Does God care about this? *Does God care about this?* Does God care about human beings being spoken of as if they are less than human? Does God care about how poor and marginalized people in our society are treated? Does God care about peace—the peace that is not merely an absence of conflict but the presence of justice? Does God care about kindness? Kindness, by the way, is different than being nice and polite—because anybody who has worked with a passive-aggressive person knows that you can be "nice" and not really care about the person you're nice to.

To wake up each morning thinking, *God is making God's appeal to the through me* is to feel in your pocket and find not just your cellphone, but a piece of the truth that *you are loved*. And to feel in your other pocket and find not just your keys, but the other piece of the truth that *so are they*.

Which means that no matter how much you disagree with whoever you consider to be they or them, no matter how misguided, or naïve, or cruel, or whatever you think they may be, they are still God's beloved.

That doesn't mean you don't speak up. It means you speak in love.

To wake up each morning thinking God is making God's appeal to the world through me is to become brave enough to speak up—especially for those whose voices aren't heard—but it also means being discerning enough to listen in order to understand other people's experiences and to hear their pain and confusion, because I guarantee you *we all hurt*.

This week I had a marvelous privilege. I had the privilege of speaking at the former Secretary of Defense's internment at Arlington and his memorial service at National Presbyterian Church. And at the end of each service, I had both Republicans and Democrats telling me thank you.

Frank Carlucci, in addition to being a Secretary of Defense and a National Security Advisor—and a member of Immanuel Presbyterian Church, by the way—was also an ambassador. He was an Ambassador to Portugal. The stories I heard about his time as Ambassador there testified to how he did the work that ambassadors are supposed to do, like speaking up on behalf of the country that he or she is meant to represent. He was an ambassador. We are called to be ambassadors, too. Ambassadors through whom God is making God's appeal to the world for reconciliation, and justice, and love.

During our Celebrations and Concerns time this morning we're going to be sending Sarah Sherman on her way for a couple of months. She is on her way to Europe to take part in a program sponsored by a group called *Musicians Without Borders*.

She is going to be trained as a community music facilitator. *Musicians Without Borders* is an organization which works in many parts of the world which experience chronic conflict, and with populations that have undergone traumatic experiences which rob them of humanity. They are in Palestine, Ireland, Kosovo, Germany and Rwanda, among other places.

Sarah wrote to me, *"Many times, when people think of community music and world peace, they think of people standing in a circle singing kumbaya. I believe—she wrote me—that peace is much more nuanced than that. It is not a condition that will ever fall, finally and absolutely, on our societies. There will always be conflict- individual, relational, and institutional- which rears its head. Then, what is peace? And how can it possibly continue to be sought in the face of all the conflict we see within us and around us? Peace is way of being, a way of living. It is present. I believe science and art to be almost identical, but as opposed to science, which we can discover and write down as a universal fact to be learned and known and applied, an artistic way of being is a way of deep listening in each unique, present moment.*

*That is the important work of Musicians without Borders. Making music together. When we do that, when we make music together, it is of course imperative for each person to play their differing, unique parts in order to provide rich harmony, and so the success of the entire endeavor depends upon showing up and listening deeply to one another.*

Sarah wrote: *Creating music not only gives us skills to listen to each other, but also to express ourselves vulnerably and creatively and to feel heard. In places like refugee camps, where millions of people live outside the structure, protection, and identity of a state, music can allow people to touch their own humanity and feel included in a purpose larger than themselves.*

As Sarah put it, in her own words: *the work of Musicians Without Borders is basically to use music as a spiritual language and promote empathy, allowing us to touch what is most human beneath all dividing lines.*

I am proud that Sarah is taking part in this program through *Musicians Without Borders*. It occurs to me that Frank Carlucci is not the only ambassador in our congregation. Sarah is, too. And actually, every single one of us has that call.

Reach in your pockets for your cell phone and your keys. Remember: you are loved and so are they. We can even say that on the week that we celebrate July 4<sup>th</sup>. In Jesus' name. *Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Douglas Wood, *Old Turtle and the Broken Truth*. (New York: Scholastic Publishing, 2003)