

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"The Great Exchange"
Dr. J. Dent

March 14, 2010
Fourth Sunday in Lent

Two weeks ago, we concluded our teaching with the understanding that Paul calling all believers "citizens of heaven" was another way to say that all of us who trust Christ are "from away," from a ways away, if you will. Today Paul teaches us about not only about having our citizenship from away, but also that we are ambassadors of that way.

Now you may not think of yourself as an ambassador for Jesus Christ and for Christianity. But that is what you are, if you have committed yourself to him. And most today would see being an ambassador as quite an honour. It is indeed an honour. Because everything that the country or organization or person you represent is riding on what you say about them. An ambassador is a spokesperson for that country, organization or person. That is what every true believer is, a spokesperson for God, a priest of the Most High, and all of us who share relationship have that mutual privilege.

Now just as I might be chosen to represent our national denomination, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, if I am voted in to be Moderator in just over two weeks, it is good to think about what you might say as Ambassador of your organization, the person at the centre of your organization, the Lord Jesus. It would be good to reflect on what you would say to someone if you only had a minute or a sound byte of 15 or 30 seconds. What would you say about the Lord? Take a moment and think about that. What would you say?

How would you rock this rock? Paul gives the most stunning of illustrations which reaches into the deepest part of who we are. He talks about the Great Exchange. What is this exchange?

It is simply that we give our brokenness and sin to God and God gives us life and hope and an eternity together with Him and His. We give God the manure of our life, he gives us back the fruit from the tree of life. Now that's a pretty good exchange. In fact, it's the best. Jesus, who knew no sin, takes our sin upon himself and the penalty of it, and gives us freedom, new life and peace. It's almost unbelievable. I suppose it is unbelievable if you cannot accept a gift.

But that's the kicker. All of life is a gift. Our birth is a gift. Our families are a gift. Our relationships, our education, our friendships, our community, our way of life, our intellect, our spiritual life all are gifts. Now we can look at the broken side of each of these things I have mentioned, but still what we have we have as a gift. Yes, we may have put a lot of effort and energy into developing our gifts, but the fact that we have them at all is a reminder to us to be grateful for the gift.

And when we are grateful for the gift, then we can turn to the Gift Giver and say, "Thank you," from the depths of our being. Is there any other exchange that can rival the exchange that Jesus offers us? I remember reading a book which was made up of short stories. One of the stories was about a man who sold rags. This was a well known profession for generations. But this ragman had an air of the supernatural. He would exchange his clean rags for dirty ones. And often when his clean ones would come into the possession of the person desiring something fresh to wear, that person would not only be freshly clothed, their wounds would heal and their bodies would mend. Strangely, the rag man would be seen hobbling off as the lame man or woman would be able to walk. This of course is a picture of what the Lord can do for us, broken and grieving though we may be. And I direct you to that story, for I have not told it well.

The Great Exchange is the heart of God the Father. This is the same God who had two sons. One son was wayward and demanded his share of the inheritance even before the father had died. That father was generous and gave it to him. But all the younger son could do was feed his addictions and that is what he did, until the inheritance was all gone. Yet the father's heart broke for his son and he longed to be reunited with him. Meanwhile, the older son continued to be faithfully about his chores, but secretly bitter and resentful of what he had accomplished on the family farm.

None of this came out, until the wayward son decided to sell himself back to his father as a slave rather than starve where he was, feeding pigs. The father would have nothing of this. His heart was wonderfully warmed when the younger son came home. He threw a party for him, gave him new clothes and a special of recognition in the family. The father's generosity had not suffered through the son's abuse of that generosity.

But now the older son's secret bitterness and resentment came out. He chastised his father and thought that his father should have beat and rejected his son or worse. But the older son was the one who hurting inside. All the father could do was to turn to the older son and express his deep love for his older son as well. He looked at him with such love in his eyes and truly said "Everything I have is yours."

Many of us have taken the position of the over-responsible older son and harbor bitterness or feeling like we have had to take the whole burden while others get to go off and play and do what they like. The father turns to the over-responsible and says, "Everything I have is yours." You are not responsible for making the world run smoothly, that is God's job. Come to me and rest.

And to those of us who are the under-responsible, the prodigals, the ones who are finding ways to play, to these we do not hear words of condemnation, although they deserve to hear these words. No, we hear gracious words, words of restoration to those who come back humbly, hungry for what the father can do.

Jesus was speaking this parable to those religious leaders who had a hard time accepting that the Teacher's message was for the sinners and tax collectors. I suppose we could translate that as for the drug dealers and organized crime bosses, the pimps and perpetrators.

Someone once told me they found it strange that when they went to their 12 step program (AA, NA, SA, OA, etc.), they would be required to show their brokenness but couldn't talk about Jesus. Whereas at church, they could talk all they wanted about Jesus, but not about their brokenness.

God talks directly to us. God wants us to know how much we are loved. It is our choice to respond back with love and acceptance of God's ways, just as in any love relationship. But once we do make that choice, we are ambassadors of the Most High. This is a privilege that outranks all others.

It's not about how well we speak, or even about how together our lives really are. It's about pointing to the One who gives life, who forgives sins, who makes human transformation possible.