

Text: Ephesians 2: 11-22
Title: Kowalski and Christ
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Roger Allen Nelson Kowalski and Christ

The portrayal of the pastor in Paul Schrader's new movie "First Reformed" got me thinking about ministers in movies and reminded me of a scene that I love.

In "Gran Torino" Clint Eastwood plays Walt Kowalski, a beer swillin', tobacco chewin', retired autoworker. A cantankerous Korean War veteran, he's angry at a changing neighborhood and a changing world. Early in the movie, at the funeral luncheon for Walt's wife, an earnest young priest tells Walt that he promised his dying wife he would look after him and that she wishes he would go to confession. To which Walt hisses:

Well, I confess that I never really cared for church very much and the only reason that I went was because of her. And I confess that I have no desire to confess to a boy that is just out of the seminary.

When the priest presses further Walt snarls:

I don't know what you're peddling padre... I think you're an over educated 27-year-old virgin who likes to hold the hands of old ladies who are superstitious and promise them eternity.

And, with that Walt walks away.

Dear friends, Walt voices a common assessment of church and faith.

Religion is relegated to something for little old ladies and naïve young men. Church is a place for niceties ~ a boring relic that offers the uptight and the sure-they're-right the quaint hope of an eternal fairyland. Faith is little more than musings about things vague and ethereal and has little to do with the rough-n-tumble-real-world of money, power, politics, and sex. And church or faith is mostly insignificant or inconsequential....

Now. I may sound like a defensive padre, but that assessment is a far cry from what Paul proclaims about Jesus. For, if Walt Kowalski is right then we are those who are to be most pitied, but if Paul is right, then we're sitting with something that calls for seatbelts and crash helmets. If Walt is right then we are little more than a culture-club, but if Paul is right then we have a window into a radical reconfiguration of reality.

Consider....

Paul writes that the purpose of God in Christ was to create in himself one new humanity. And, the word that Paul uses to describe this action, *katallasso* is significant. We translate it as reconciliation, but it is not just two opposing parties making up. In Greek it has the sense of a thorough change, or a complete exchange of one thing for another.

In our text:

separation for unity,
hostility for peace,
alienation for belonging,
exclusion for inclusion,
farness for nearness,
two for one.

Maybe the best description of *katallasso* is found in the fourth and fifth verses of this chapter in Ephesians.

Because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgression...

The exchange: death for life.

That is to say, that God in Christ has changed everything.

There is a new humanity.

In Paul's cosmology ~ the way things are ~ we are separated from God and from each other. To quote Frederick Buechner:

The power of sin is centrifugal. When at work in a human life, it tends to push everything out toward the periphery. Bits and pieces fly off until only the core is left. Eventually bits and pieces of the core itself go flying off until in the end nothing at all is left. "The wages of sin are death" is St. Paul's way of saying the same thing.

In "Gran Torino" Walt Kowalski is alienated from his children, tortured by the memories of what he did in Korea, and he spits out foulmouthed racist bile. The movie revolves around his relationship with Cambodian immigrants who move in next door. It's a poor neighborhood where the gangs now rule the weak through fear and intimidation. They're trapped in a spiral of violence, rape, and retaliation. Walt sees his world coming apart at the seams. The movie is a meditation on how the centrifugal power of sin separates and ultimately destroys community, culture, and self.

And, we all have our own stories of that reality.

We all know how things finally come apart at the seams when greed, revenge, adultery, idolatry, narcissism, pride, etc... wedge their way in. We all have our own stories of how the wages get paid.

But! But, if Walt Kowalski is wrong and Paul is right then we've been reconciled to God by Christ. If Walt Kowalski is wrong and Paul is right then the centrifugal force of sin has no ultimate power. All things are gathered-in in Christ. (Erin's sermon last week.) And, if Walt is wrong and Paul is right then this new humanity is a reality to which we can neither add nor subtract ~ because the exchange of death for life isn't a matter of obedience,

or orthodoxy,
or effort,
or ethnicity,
or religious niceties.

Rather, our reconciliation is in Christ who himself is our peace.
Thanks be to God.

While in Israel last year we passed in and out of the West Bank almost every day. We waited outside of high impenetrable walls topped with razor wire and security cameras. We went through check points manned by 20-year-olds with machine guns. We passed before turrets and tanks. We watched the daily aggression of Palestinians being detained and searched. We saw life divided by a wall....

For Paul that wall was not a physical reality but a spiritual reality. It was a matter of ethnicity, religious practice, and the call of God. Jews on one side. Gentiles on the other. The ordering of creation. There was no other way to imagine the world. But now Paul writes that instead of a wall there is the reconciling power of God in Christ:

His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

The remarkable implication of this new humanity is that those things which once stood as dividing walls, those constructions that we set as barriers, those ways in which we draw lines, are all obliterated. Now...

Jew and Gentile are equally part of the same family.

Hebrew and Palestinian are brother and sister.

White Nationalists and Honduran immigrants are fellow citizens.

Liberals and conservatives belong to one another.

Black and white, male and female, slave and free, gay and straight....

The in and the out, the us and the them, the saved and the damned....

All are gathered together in Christ through the cross.

Inconceivable. Right?

Ludicrous. Right?

If Walt Kowalski is right then we should be touselled on the head and sent away like naive children, but if Paul is right then we are reconciled with God in Christ and there is a new humanity. Thanks be to God.

Of course, what we experience doesn't mirror the reality of a new humanity. Alienation and hostility still rule the day. Fear and hate have the upper hand. Lately it seems like bits and pieces are flying off and the center will no longer hold. Faith feels foolish ~ like holding the hands of superstitious little old ladies and promising them eternity.

And yet...

And yet, we hold out hope.

I want for faith.

I long to feel a little breeze of the Spirit, or catch a glimpse of the Kingdom....

For, our text ends with the wall demolished and God building a temple in which he dwells. And the verb is present tense, "you too are being built."

This new humanity is an ongoing construction project of the Spirit.

Sally Brown puts it this way:

The new household of God is not a purely spiritual reality that we visit briefly on Sundays -- a weekly "time out" in which we pretend peace is possible by sitting next to people we scrupulously avoid the rest of the time. The church is the daring practice of new politics -- a different kind of power, the self-outpoured, boundary-crossing power of Christ's cross. We trust this power, letting it undermine every wall, until we are "built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God"

Therefore, dear friends, come.

Come as you are, come whoever you are, come from near and come from afar.

Come, for there is no better sign and seal of a new humanity than the table of the Lord. It may seem a religious nicety, insignificant and inconsequential, but there is here a window of a new humanity, the very dwelling of God....

The walls that separate are destroyed.

Jesus has saved a place for you.

Come to the table – we are reconciled to God in Christ.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.