ROYAL AMBASSADORS
Scripture: Psalm 32 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

FOCUS: We are given amazing grace and are called to respond by faithfully answering the call to become ambassadors for Christ.

Last week we tackled the difficult issue of suffering, especially unmerited suffering. We came to the conclusion, or at least I did, there is no simple explanation. We also lay claim to the hopeful assurance it is not God’s mission, or desire, to rain down suffering on us. Rather, having experienced real human life through the Son, God understands us and seeks to walk with us through all of life’s journey, the good times, the bad times, the just plain old boring times. We also were reminded, God’s ways are not ours, God’s understanding is not ours and neither can be fully grasp by us in this lifetime. While suffering cannot be fully understood, while the “why” questions will never be fully answered here and now, we are called to have faith and to trust we will understand it better by and by as the old hymn says.

In the Psalm we have read this morning we find David wrestling with a variety of emotions. I can identify with David. Life is a roller coaster ride! As another old gospel hymn reminds us, “sometimes you are up and sometimes you are down”. And we all look for ways to calm our stomachs on the journey. It is helpful to remember the chorus of that spiritual, ***“Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows but Jesus.”*** Now that may not be the whole truth. One of the blessings which comes from being a part of a true family of faith like ours is we do share both sorrows and joys and help carry each other’s burdens. Still, it is a source of comfort and joy that Jesus knows all our sorrows, all our burdens and seeks to help carry them.

David acknowledges his suffering in verses three and four. In The Message he laments, ***“While I kept it all inside, my bones turned to powder, my words became daylong groans. The pressure never let up; all the juices of my life dried up.”***  We all know those feelings don’t we? Life is a pressure cooker. We know pressure at work, who among us has not had to meet an unrealistic deadline? We know it at school, there is pressure to make good grades, pressure to fit in. We know it at home, there is pressure to be a good spouse, parent or child. Like David we all, at times, keep pressure built up inside. The world tells us we must do so. In our fast paced, driven society stress is often worn as a badge of honor. We are like the pastor I worked with some years ago who told me, with what seemed to be pride, he had a commitment every night for three entire weeks. Parents and grandparents know what it is like to have some place to be almost every night with all of the sports and other activities the kids are participating in.

So what was it David kept in? The NRSV simply says he kept silence. We make a mistake when we assume silence means everything is rocking along smoothly. Most of us know the uncomfortable feeling of being given the silent treatment and have probably been the dispensers as well! All of us have gone silent at times when we are boiling inside, unable to put words to our emotions. Sometimes we keep silent to avoid saying something stupid and that is often a very good thing. And we are at times silent before God. That can be good or bad.

Our text reveals David maintained his silence in an effort to hide his sin from God. Not good. Why in the world would he do that? Why in the world are we guilty as well? Most of us would agree, God knows us better than we know ourselves. Scripture tells us so. But there is an odd disconnect between what we affirm intellectually and how we live our lives. Like Paul I know better but still do stupid and thoughtless things. I sin. I somehow convince myself God doesn’t really know.

The good news is God knows I sin and God knows I at times cannot help myself. So God offers a way to let the steam out of the pressure cooker which bottles up all my guilt. We need to follow the example of the psalmist. Again turning to The Message, we hear David speak to God, ***“Then I let it all out; I said “I’ll make a clean breast of my failures to God”. Suddenly the pressure was gone-my guilt dissolved, my sin disappeared.”*** Another one of those things my head understands but my actions often deny is the wisdom of regular, intentional and honest prayer. Not the vending machine kind which asks and hopes but real prayer which confesses and listens. That listening is the good kind of silence before God. Real prayer doesn’t remove all the challenges. Real prayer does relieve the pressure born of silence before God. The opening words of our psalm reflect the results. ***“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”***

When we break the unhealthy silence of deception, when we honestly share our lives: the fears, the foolishness, the hopes, the joys, all our lives with God we encounter a freedom and an enlivening sense of relief. It is as if we have been reborn, set free from our past. I’m reminded of the chorus to Chris Tomlins altered version of Amazing Grace. ***“My chains are gone. I've been set free. My God, my Savior has ransomed me. And like a flood His mercy reigns. Unending love, Amazing grace.*** It is truly amazing. We have become so familiar with John Newton’s iconic hymn, the phrase “amazing grace” has almost become a cliché. But if we honestly ponder the idea we will be brought to our knees in awe. When we realize our sins can be forgiven, our transgressions wiped clean we must be changed by the encounter.

Our second text, from Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth, states it clearly, ***“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.”*** Because of God’s amazing grace we are given a clean slate and we are set free from all those things which would bind us to the past. So what are we to do with our clean slate? Like we discussed with the kids a while ago, a slate, or in our case a dry erase board, is really not serving its function if we only wipe it clean. By the way, some of you younger folk may not understand the slate reference. Before the days of dry erase and now the advent of smartboards, classrooms were equipped with chalk boards and originally they were made of slate, a type of stone on which you could write with chalk. How many of you remember the joy of being chosen to dust the erasers? When I was in school we all sought to be chosen for the task for it meant we got to leave the classroom and go outside where we would pound the sidewalk with the erasers to rid them of as much chalk dust as possible, and we became experts at making the process take as long as possible. But I digress as I wander down memory lane.

It is a wonderful thing to be given a clean slate. But when God wipes away all our failures, all our sins, it is not for the purpose of relieving us of our guilt. Grace, truly experienced, does not allow us to forget our mistakes, rather it demands we learn from them and then allows us to move on, our sins forgiven but never embraced. As we put them behind us, as we gaze at the clean slate we are called to write a new message, to document the nature of our new selves, the new creation of which Paul speaks. So what should we write? Perhaps a good place to begin would be with a job description. We who have changed jobs know how important it is to have a clear understanding concerning title and responsibilities. So what job title goes at the top of our clean slate?

Paul spells it out for us, we are to be ambassadors for Christ. Did any of the rest of you reformed Baptists out there go to RAs when you were in elementary school? I went on most Wednesdays. It was a boys only mission study and activity group which met weekly. We went to RAs and the girls went to GAs. In a sign of the times GA stood for Girls Auxiliary, and, much as in scouting there were various levels to be attained based on accomplishments and proficiencies. The steps from those days in mid twentieth century would not pass the muster of political correctness these day. GAs were first Maidens, then in order Ladies in-Waiting, Princesses, and various levels of Queens.

In RAs I don’t remember such a royal class structure. We were just all called Royal Ambassadors. That is the reason all this ancient history came to mind. For the record, at some point the name of the GAs was changed to Girls in Action, and now churches have the option of having co-ed groups which are called Children in Action.

Having been offered a clean slate, we are to assume the role of Royal Ambassadors for Christ and the kingdom of God, that is our job title. So what exactly does it mean, what is our job description? According to Webster an ambassador is ***“an accredited diplomat sent by a country as its official representative to a foreign country.”*** The notion made popular by [Stanley Hauerwas](https://www.bing.com/search?q=stanley+hauerwas&filters=ufn%3a%22stanley+hauerwas%22+sid%3a%227fa632ee-1c8c-5a11-3f70-c954f837c5cd%22+catguid%3a%22b5bc84be-1f56-2f02-fe2e-06a23f853584_21672fa4%22+segment%3a%22generic.carousel%22&FORM=SNAPST) and [William Willimon](https://www.bing.com/search?q=william+henry+willimon&filters=ufn%3a%22william+henry+willimon%22+sid%3a%228fde2c6e-2ce1-4393-7f0a-9aa7f7aa2e10%22+catguid%3a%22b5bc84be-1f56-2f02-fe2e-06a23f853584_21672fa4%22+segment%3a%22generic.carousel%22&FORM=SNAPST).in their book Resident Aliens defines our mission. As royal ambassadors of Christ we are charged with the weighty responsibility of living in this world as representatives of the spiritual kingdom which is our eternal residence. Let that sink in for a moment. It is our responsibility, not our option, to so live we faithfully represent the interests of God’s kingdom. We are resident aliens here on earth, commissioned to represent God’s kingdom

I searched out the oath of office our civic ambassadors to other countries take. It is a common oath taken by many government officials. ***“I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God.”***

Thinking about our clean slates, that oath is not a bad model as we consider what should be written there. We are called to support and defend the foundational truths of God’s kingdom as revealed in the Bible and through the presence of the Holy Spirit. We are to remember our true citizenship is in heaven. We are to faithfully be about the duties of true disciples of Christ. And we can do all of that only as we rely on God’s help. You have been tapped as an ambassador, every one of you. It is an important post and it comes with real expectations.

It is a good feeling to be chosen. I have some pretty dreadful memories from days on the elementary playground and in the gym during middle school. Do you remember the drill? The entire class, from the most gifted athlete to the most awkward of adolescents would be gathered as “sides” were chosen. Suffice it to say, I was not ever the first one chosen. It was not a good feeling. We prefer being the ones chosen early on. We like having our skills recognized and rewarded. We want to feel important to the team.

Some of us are athletically inclined, others of us, not so much. Some of us are quite musical, others don’t know one note from another. Some of us have spectacular talents, some of us are gifted to be about unspectacular but critical work. When it comes to civic matters not many are chosen to serve as ambassadors. The United States maintains diplomatic relationships with 160 nations and each embassy has an ambassador. So of the roughly 325 million of us one in every 2 million or so will be chosen ambassador. Not very good odds, especially for those of us who tend not to be the first chosen.

But such is not how it works when it comes to the kingdom of God. The rules are quite different. Paul reminds us once our slates are wiped clean we are not to see things primarily through the lens of human perspective. And when it comes to appointing ambassadors, God’s criterion is much different and far more inclusive than the world’s criterion. Any of us who truly seek to follow Jesus are appointed. It is as if the kid on the playground chosen to pick first said, ***“I’ll take them all, if they are willing to play on my team.”***

Like so many things in politics, civic ambassadorships are often handed out as rewards for support or recognition for some accomplishment. That is the way things done from the human point of view tend to work. But we are not ambassadors for an earthly kingdom, ours is a commission from the realm of the Spirit. We are not made ambassadors because we have earned the position, rather we accept the appointment which is offered to all, because of what God has done for us. All are called, all are chosen, but having our slate wiped clean we must accept the post prepared for. Many will accept, sadly many will not.

Once we accept the ambassadorship, what will be our job description? Paul tells us. We are called to a ministry of reconciliation. He says we are not to regard anyone from a human point of view. A ministry of reconciliation certainly fits the bill. It seems there is no clearer mark of our human condition these days than division, rancor and judgementalism. If we are to be faithful to our calling we must be about reconciliation. We must begin by being reconciled to God. We must confess our sin, repent of our brokenness and then accept the grace of God as our slates are wiped clean. Then we are to do all in our power to be reconciled to others as we invite them to join us in God’s service. As ambassadors we are called to love God and to love each other. Then and only then will true reconciliation come

For you sake, for the sake of all those ambassadors who have yet to report to their posts and for the one who wants us all on his team. Let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.