



First United Church of Oak Park

Ambassadors for Christ

2 Corinthians 5: 16-20

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One of the odd things about leading worship in this way is that everything has to be done in advance. Videos have to be filmed, then edited together, then uploaded to YouTube. We've learned from one or two technical difficulties to build in some time for unexpected errors. The end result is that I've learned that I need to finish recording my sermons no later than Thursday mornings. On a normal week, this just means I need to avoid times when the recycling trucks are going through my alley. But this week, recording on Thursday morning means that I do not know what the results of our election are. Perhaps those results will be clear very soon. Perhaps not. So I am grateful for the old words, for the words from scripture that have stood the test of time for millennia. I am grateful for the passage we just read from 2 Corinthians where the moral duty of a Christian is described as how we are ambassadors for Christ.

We are ambassadors for Christ. What does that mean? Does being an ambassador for Christ mean that we are supposed to speak on behalf of Christ and bear the truth about Christ to others? No, that's what a messenger does. A messenger communicates on behalf of someone else; that's not an ambassador. Does being an ambassador for Christ mean that we are supposed to stand in for Christ and do the work that Christ would do were he living today? No, that's what a representative does. A representative stands in for someone else who is not present and acts to further their interests; that's not an ambassador.

We are ambassadors for Christ. What does that mean?

An ambassador is someone who travels far away from home, away to another country, to live among people with different values, different laws, different rulers. But there in that foreign land, the ambassador lives according to the laws of their own home country. They are not subject to the laws of the country they go

to. They are immune from those laws and instead are subject to the laws of their home country. An embassy — which is just a building where the powers of an ambassador are formally housed — is a place where the laws of another country are in force. If you enter Suite 1100 of 737 North Michigan Avenue, you have entered the Japanese embassy, where Consul General Okada is the ambassador from Japan, and there the laws of Japan are in force. Wherever Consul General Okada goes, he is under the laws of Japan. That's what an ambassador is, a little piece of their home country moving out in the world.

In one sense this makes them above the law; they can do what they please. Except that an ambassador is also someone who will someday be called home, and there back in their home country, they will be called to give an account of what they have done, an account of how they lived out the laws of their home country in a foreign land.

We are ambassadors for Christ. What does that mean? I think it's easier to look at one person who really lived this out.

Let me tell you the story of one ambassador for Christ — Raoul Wallenberg. Technically speaking, Raoul Wallenberg was an ambassador for Sweden living in Hungary. As soon as he arrived in Hungary, he started snapping up real estate. Workers would come in and renovate the interior and then big signs would be hung on the front declaring that the buildings housed institutions with names like the “Swedish Library” or “The Institute of Swedish Research.” He hung huge Swedish flags off the front of these buildings, and would travel around town in a fleet of cars that were all painted like a Swedish flag of yellow and blue. Raoul Wallenberg did not do this because he was such a zealot for Swedish culture. He did this because it was 1945, and he was the Swedish ambassador to German-occupied Hungary.

Raoul Wallenberg knew that the German-backed puppet government was conducting sweeps of the Jewish ghettos in Budapest. Neighborhood by neighborhood, Jews were being loaded into train cars and taken to Auschwitz. The laws that governed Budapest were corrupt and death dealing, but Raoul Wallenberg was an ambassador; he was not bound by those corrupt laws. He lived by a different set of laws. He carried with him stacks and stacks of what he called “protective passports,” official-looking documents that declared that the one bearing the passport was a subject of the King of Sweden returning home and was not to be detained for any reason. They looked very official but no such

document existed in Sweden — Ambassador Wallenberg just made it up and started printing them by the hundreds inside the Swedish Library.

On one occasion he climbed on top of a train car packed with people being sent to their deaths and began handing passports through the doors as they were closing, pulling as many people out as he could before declaring to the dumbfounded guards that these were Swedish citizens, before driving them all away in his fleet of blue and yellow cars.

He gave these protective passports out to Jews as fast as he could print them, bringing people to the buildings he had scattered around town, the “Swedish Library” or “The Institute of Swedish Research” and many others that were in fact safe houses that could hold up to 10,000 people. People would be hidden there and later sneak out of the country with fabricated Swedish identities. He saved tens of thousands of lives because he did not obey corrupt and death-dealing laws but lived according to different laws — he was an ambassador! Raoul Wallenberg was the Swedish ambassador to Hungary in 1945.

That’s how the Bible talks about being ambassadors for Christ. That’s what it means.

It means that wherever we live, wherever we go, whatever life or chance or outrageous fortune might lay before us, we are subjects of the realm of God, baptized into a different nation. We answer to Christ as the ruler of our lives. The love of God in Jesus Christ is the law we are bound to follow. Wherever we go, there goes with us a little piece of the reign of God, an embassy of Heaven on the earth. Or to quote 2 Corinthians: If anyone is in Christ, there is the new creation. Behold all things are made new!

It is Thursday morning. And I don’t know which direction our nation will turn as we stand at this great crossroads. Perhaps you watching this on Sunday morning do know. Or perhaps you don’t. Perhaps the uncertainty of a vote count that is still not finished has been replaced by a new and more threatening uncertainty. But knowing or unknowing, the question comes — where do my loyalties lie? What shall I do? What am I to do as a Christian?

As Christians we are called to be ambassadors for Christ. We are called to follow the way and cause of Christ, not settling for any lesser good. We are called to

stand against the powers of sin and death, not allowing fear of what wrongdoers might do dictate our actions.

We are ambassadors for Christ and so we can do extraordinary things, things so brave they leave those who witness them dumbfounded, because it is like we aren't playing by the same rules as everyone else, like we aren't held back by the same assumptions as everyone else, like we are free to do what is right, not asking permission from any worldly power. Because like all ambassadors, though we may sojourn long in a foreign land, someday we will be called home. Someday we will be called back to our home country, called before the judgment seat of Christ, and there be called to give an account of what we have done, an account of how we lived out the laws of the love of Christ. Because we are ambassadors for Christ.