

"A FRESH START"
2 Corinthians 5:15-21
March 31, 2019 Lent Four
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

(The Message)

¹⁴⁻¹⁵ Our firm decision is to work from this focused center: One man died for everyone. That puts everyone in the same boat. He included everyone in his death so that everyone could also be included in his life, a resurrection life, a far better life than people ever lived on their own.

¹⁶⁻²⁰ Because of this decision we don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore. Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and God, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. God put the world square with Godself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what God is doing. We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; God is already a friend with you.

²¹ How? you ask. In Christ. God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God.

How would you like to create a NEW you? It's easy - at least according to the Ads I see. There is no end to the possibilities.

- You can freeze off your belly fat and your life will be changed forever!
- You can pay tens of thousands of dollars for exercise machines that are connected online to real life fitness trainers who will yell at you from across the miles. Tone up your abs and look out world!

- You can sign up for any number of diet plans- real food, liquid food, powdered food, and no food- it is a veritable buffet of options! And before you know it you will be better than ever!
- Every day there are new make-up options that will change your life forever! Don't live with inferior eyebrows—you deserve better than that!
- All you need is some new clothing to find your best self. Everything you currently have in your closet is obsolete and will not show the world who you really are.

Have you ever noticed how all of these opportunities to become a NEW you have large price tags attached to them? Of course, there are times when we need to consider one of these options to actually improve our health- exercise and a nutritious diet are vital for our well-being. But I also think that from the very beginning, the advertising industry knew that people would pay almost any amount to become something they aren't, but aspire to be. And the easier it is, the better. And most of the time when someone sheds all that weight or pumps up their muscles or wears the latest fashions, they realize that although they may look like a new person- the essence of who they were and are is still there. So maybe becoming a new person, getting a fresh start, involves more than just changing the way we look. **Maybe it means changing the way we see.**

Last week we heard how Paul may have communicated with the Christians in Corinth in a text. This morning we look more closely at what he meant by becoming a new creation- and it has nothing to do with dying your hair or ingesting fitness supplements.

Here is what we need to know about the churches in the Greek city of Corinth. According to Eugene Peterson, "*The Corinthian Christians gave their founding pastor, Paul, more trouble than all his other churches put together. No sooner did Paul get one problem straightened out than three more appeared. But however much trouble the Corinthians were to each other and to Paul, they prove to be a cornucopia of blessings to us, for they triggered some of Paul's most profound and vigorous writings.*" (*The Message*)

So how did he get here? Paul founded the house churches in the rough and tumble city of Corinth. After a year and a half, he went off to other cities to do the same thing. He sent his first letter, which we know as First Corinthians, to address some problems that were cropping up in the young church. After sending that letter, Paul decided to go back to visit the churches and check on their progress. While he was there someone insulted and criticized him and the church leaders took no action to either defend Paul or rebuke his opposition. Paul left town in disgrace, broken-hearted. He then sent what is known as the "letter of tears"

criticizing the whole community for not supporting him. Paul later learns through Titus that the church finally disciplined the offender.

By the time he wrote this letter, known as *Second Corinthians*, the rift was being healed. Paul's gratitude for this reconciliation is quite visible as he addresses the internal tensions within the church. If we learn anything from this letter it is this: the church was not a group of impeccable saints but one of imperfect sinners in the process of being saved and learning what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

We find Paul's main focus in verse 17, *"If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new."* I want to be clear that Paul's celebration of becoming a new creation doesn't mean that who we are isn't good enough. We spend enough time disparaging ourselves for not being "enough"- smart enough, nice enough, rich enough, thin enough, religious enough. Paul isn't piling onto our low self-esteem. He is encouraging us to become the people God calls us to be- to become even more genuinely ourselves. It is an invitation to see ourselves through new eyes- the eyes of Christ.

Paul's conversion as an Apostle of Christ was about as dramatic as anyone's. Known in those days as, Saul, he was a devout Jew, a fiery opponent of anyone who threatened the Jewish faith. He was a fierce enemy of the Jesus movement- persecuting the disciples and anyone else he could get his hands on. One day, on his way to Damascus to beat up more Christians, he was knocked to the ground and had a vision of the Risen Christ asking him, "Why are you persecuting me?"

He was struck blind for several days and was cared for by the very people he was on his way to arrest. When he regained his sight- he **really** regained his sight and began to see himself and others and the whole world in a new way. He suddenly knew that there was more to life than what he had previously known. Because of the love and grace he experienced through Christ, he was a new creation. He was also given a new name, Paul. His mission then became inviting others to recognize themselves as new creations in Christ as well.

Before he met the Risen Christ, Paul thought he knew how to see- he thought he knew what the world looked like, he thought he knew what the world was about. He thought he knew all of the possibilities. But once his eyes were opened, he realized that he had not seen anything! And suddenly it was a whole new ball game. Before his conversion Paul had been a deeply religious man, he was pretty sure he knew everything there was to know about God. But after he met Christ, he realized just how narrow his vision had been. He understands now that God's creation- including us- is in a constant state of renewal.

That is what this season of Lent is all about. The word "Lent" means springtime. And what does springtime make you think of? ----- New life- sunshine- warmth- growth- new possibilities? Lent is a time for us in the church to take a good look at ourselves and to ask God to show us what we really look like. It is a time for us to renew our commitment to Christ and to one another. It is a time to move out of the hibernation of the winter of our souls and to emerge as empowered people.

Lent is the season that leads us to the cross of Jesus and beyond his death into the celebration of Easter and new life. That is why Lent is a season of reflection-

- Are we ready for new life?
- Do we even want new life?
- Are we the people God has called us to be?
- Are we the church Christ wants us to become?

I don't see Lent as a time of deprivation or self-denial but instead as a time of renewal and rebirth. I love springtime, watching the new buds form on the trees, waiting for the flowers to poke their tiny heads out of the ground and unfurl their glorious colors. In springtime the world looks brand new. Through Jesus God made the world brand new. For Christians, the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb of death unleashed the power and presence of God in a whole new way. Our world is God-created and God-invaded. And the question for us in the church is, are we a part of this great and glorious invasion?

Claiming our new life in Christ is not without struggle. We live in a world and in a culture that doesn't celebrate God's way of seeing. It is a world that thrives on chaos, alienation, and brokenness. It is a world that values people by what they have and what they look like. Paul says, "We no longer see others from a human point of view." That human point of view is what has created and sustained racism, sexism, homophobia, and every other exclusive label human beings can conjure. That point of view is what keeps us safe in our little cocoons- associating only with people who look and think and act as we do. But God has other plans- reconciling to Godself all people regardless of gender, status, sexuality, identity, religion, political party, or color.

The Corinthian church was feeling the tension between the old way of seeing and the new way. And we feel the tension today. We are called to behold a brand new world that is at odds with the values of the old world- well, really, it is at odds with those who profit from the way the "old" world works. And that way is with fear, anxiety, social injustice, hate, oppression, violence, poverty, war, and exploitation—and boy is that profitable.

Paul says if you claim to be a follower of Christ you are not allowed to judge others the way humans judge each other. You are not allowed to ignore God's invasion of the world and your role in it.

The reign of God is already here- we aren't supposed to be passive and just wait for the "rapture" to take us up into heaven. God is waiting for us to live as true believers right here, right now- on this good earth. It is all about bringing everyone back into a right relationship with God. It is all about embodying Christ's love, goodness, compassion, mercy, and grace in our lives. It is all about radical transformation.

Paul knew that if we claim to be followers of Jesus then others will judge him by our lives. And so we have to ask: Are we a true reflection of Christ? What will others learn about him by looking at us?

Don't let this scare you—it isn't easy but it is possible because we don't do it by our own wisdom and power- but with Christ working through us.

"On the cross Jesus took upon himself all that estranges us from God. In doing so he makes it possible for us to experience a new relationship with God based upon trust and love. So transformative is this new relationship that we are now asked to become the visible expression of this new reality to our world. This ministry of reconciliation awakens us to God's love so that our lives proclaim it. While we are the recipients of this divine love, we also become the agents of God who passionately call others to know it for themselves." (Mark E. Hopper)

Paul knew that the way we treat each other in our congregations says a lot about what we think about God. The challenge posed to each and every community of faith is to discover the presence of God already active, already acting in the lives of its members. Because it is, you know. The power of God is acting within our particular community of faith in ways we can see and ways we can't. Our job is to open the doors so that God's reign can break into this world. Our job is to open our eyes so we can recognize Christ in each other and in every person created in God's image - every single one- no matter how hard it may be.

Healthy congregations are about loving each other into a different way of being in the presence of God. Isn't that an amazing calling? We are called to love each other so genuinely and so deeply that we learn to live in Christ's way. We are called to love each other in such a dynamic and transformative way that others will look at us and see right away that we are indeed followers of Jesus Christ.

It is a difficult and glorious calling. And you don't have to open your wallet or your closet or your refrigerator. Just open your eyes.

What does a new creation in Christ look like?

I think it looks like you.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.