

“Old and New”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 17, 2018

4th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. John Wahl

Psalms 92:1-4, 12-15

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

Paul says that we walk by faith and not by sight. He is confident that, even in the midst of any hardship or trial, everything has already become new. The hope of the gospel that he proclaims is not rooted in some desire to escape from this world – as seemingly cruel and broken as it sometimes may be – but to participate with God in the reclamation, restoration, renewal and redemption of all things in this world that God so loves.

The Bible has much to say about God’s intention to make all things new; and about the vocation of the people of God to join God in this work of renewal. This is the reason that God has made us new: not that we might find escape from the world, but that the resurrection of Christ and the hope of the gospel might sustain us in our work in and for a world that is in need of desperate need of restoration.¹

Paul had generally had a good experience during his eighteen months in the large, metropolitan city of Corinth. The church he planted there was filled with people that were dear to his heart; and though the Corinthians were a feisty group loaded with potential problems, Paul undoubtedly loved them and, even after leaving Corinth, prayed fervently for them. In his first letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul describes the church as the body of Christ with each vital member having important gifts and functions. *Faith, hope and love, these three remain*, he writes to them, *but the greatest of these is love*. (I Cor. 13:13)

So, it must have hurt to learn that in Corinth his reputation has been shattered. After Paul’s departure, some nay-sayers came to town and called Paul’s teaching and reputation into question. They impugned his credentials, claiming that he had no right to call himself an apostle. They alleged that Paul was a money-hungry charlatan whose motives were impure and whose so-called ‘gospel’ was hogwash and heresy.²

Paul knew that in his own lifetime, he had gone from being God’s number one enemy to the people of the Way to God’s beloved servant. There was a time in his life when, if someone mentioned the name ‘Jesus’ in Paul’s presence, he was intent on wiping them from the face of the earth. But not only did his name change from Saul to Paul, he had been utterly and completely transformed into a whole new creation. So it is,

¹ Michael Jackson from *A Plain Account*

² Scott Hoezee from *Center for Preaching Excellence*

he says, for us. This is not some ethereal experience, but in each way and every aspect of our lives, we place our trust in God's grace. We become accountable to God – and thus to one another – for what we do; whether good or evil. And God's grace is sufficient to give us the power to serve God in all circumstances.³

Paul's critics looked at this physical weakness – his old (at least by first century standards), beat up, scarred body and his flawed rhetorical skills – and they found no evidence of the glory of the Christ he proclaims. Paul counters that we have the treasure of the gospel in clay jars – that our bodies are like earthen vessels – *so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.* (2 Cor. 4:7)

In the ancient world, bodily scars from beatings and lashings were considered a sign of shame and dishonor. Yet Paul argues that these scars give credence to his ministry; for they are a sign of his participation in Christ's suffering and death *so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh* (2 Cor. 4:11), and in order to bring life to others.

Paul goes on to draw a contrast between the outer nature that is wasting away and the inner nature that is being renewed daily; between temporary affliction and eternal glory. He emphasizes the importance of looking *not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.* (2 Cor. 4:18)

Paul continues in this vein by contrasting the earthly tent under which we groan in the present and the heavenly dwelling for which we long. Here he emphasizes that what is mortal will be *swallowed up by life* (2 Cor. 5:4), while God gives us the Spirit as a guarantee of what is still to come.

And so, in today's passage, Paul defends the motivation of his ministry by saying that *the love of Christ urges us on.* (2 Cor. 5:14) Christ's love is shown most clearly in his death on our behalf, because *he died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.* (2 Cor. 5:15) Paul sees his own ministry authenticated by his vulnerability, weakness, and suffering; because he lives not for himself, but for Christ.

Just as Paul's view of Christ was so dramatically changed, so his view of all people – Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free – is transformed by the self-sacrificial love of Christ. *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.* (2 Cor. 5:17) Paul's language of new creation echoes Isaiah from the Old Testament where, along with the restoration of God's people, God promises a new heaven and a new earth. Paul will go on to speak of God

³ Lois Malcolm from *WorkingPreacher.com*

reconciling the world to himself in Christ and entrusting us with the ministry of reconciliation.

Christ died for all, so that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised for us. In Christ we are a new creation; even in our weakness and vulnerability. We are reconciled to God to become agents of God's reconciling love for the world. The scandal of the cross is that God chooses vulnerability, weakness, suffering, and death in order to bring new life. God places the greatest value on our service to others; even when service means suffering and rejection for us.⁴

Miroslav Volf, of Yale Divinity School, has written extensively on the theme of reconciliation, noting that in God's reconciliation of all things, it cannot just be impersonal forces of evil that are done away with. It cannot just be the creation – broadly conceived – which becomes reconciled with God. No, Volf says, it has to be more specific than that. Before we can dwell together in God's Shalom, there needs to be reconciliation between earthly enemies. Victims and perpetrators must embrace; those who have lived in conflict need it to be resolved. It's not just the lion and the lamb that need to learn to lie together, but all of us who are their equivalents in how we treat one another. There can be no peace in God's kingdom so long as there is anyone there who would seek to harm their brother or sister, neighbor or stranger.⁵

Even so, there presently are hurts, wounds, and rifts which we cannot presently heal. Perhaps this is why when we come to the Lord's Table, we receive the bread and cup with trembling hands. In the sacrament of communion, we are given a foretaste and glimpse of our Christ-granted reconciliation with God and with our fellow humanity. But in the same glance, we also see the deep rifts in our own lives; divisions which cry out for a reconciliation that still so often eludes us.

And yet, the same bread and cup that remind us of our lack of reconciliation offers us hope. We might tremble to receive the elements due to our own brokenness; some people even refuse to partake because they do not yet feel reconciled. How can the hand which we are unable to extend toward this neighbor or that stranger nevertheless reach out to take the body and blood of the Lord? How can the same hand which we use to cover to cover our faces when we weep over broken ties be worthy to receive a meal which signifies that alienation is wrong? How can we do it? Because we need it; we need this spiritual food; we need the hope it offers us.

In our celebration of the Lord's Supper, the whole loaf of bread is lifted up as a reminder of the complete and perfect presence of God among us. But then that loaf is broken and torn, with crumbs falling to the table. This symbolizes for us that our perfect wholeness – that peace for which we yearn – is not behind us, but ahead of us.

⁴ Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

⁵ As referenced by Scott Hoezee

Wholeness is coming, but the broken bread reminds us that it comes not by what we might do, but by what Jesus has already done. His brokenness is what will one day put our lives back together whole and complete; renewed in all things, including in our relationships with God and each other.

Maybe this is why it can be such a powerful and transformative experience to sit down at table with others; whether we are the host with invited guests, or when we are the ones invited to enjoy the hospitality of the other. It is in these settings that dividing walls can be brought down and the hope of reconciliation revealed. Sharing meals and conversation can be that foretaste and sign of the Shalom that God promises to us and that scripture tells us has already been accomplished through Christ, who invites us to and hosts us at his table.

Such was Paul's message of hope to the Corinthians in the midst of that messy, hurtful situation where his body – and his reputation – was scarred and suffering. And such is God's message to us in the midst of messiness of our own lives. There is a reconciliation, renewal, wholeness and peace that will be and will endure. It is a peace that we need to remember and hold onto, even – or maybe, especially – from the brokenness of our lives.

The central message of this text is, therefore, the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this act of God, everything has changed; we have been changed. Our perspective on others is now different. Because the gospel is for all people, we can no longer regard anyone from what Paul calls 'a human point of view' where we regard differences as flaws; where we fail to see individuality as anything but beauty.

If we are in Christ – a part of his family, a guest at his table, a beneficiary of his grace and mercy – then we are a new creation; the old has passed away, everything has become new. We must therefore treat all others as valued brothers and sisters in Christ – no matter where they come from or presently live, no matter how they have treated us in the past – we can no longer see them from 'a human point of view.' For, in Christ, we are a new creation. Thanks be to God. AMEN.