

“A New Creation”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 23, 2024

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 96:7-13

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. (v. 17)

Based on clues that can be found in his letters, Paul seemed to have had a somewhat rocky relationship with these people he cared for and wished to teach in the Christian community of Corinth. They were residents of a diverse, cosmopolitan Roman province, full of people of all different places and beliefs. Other prophets, bringing with them alternate messages about the gospel, were competing for the people’s attention. Though Paul may have not been the flashiest or most articulate of these apostles, he likely held the the highest expectations for the people; for, he knew that if they truly and fully put their faith in God – if, as he says here, they were *in Christ* – then amazing things would be the result.

From now on, Paul begins this section of his letter. The point in time to which he refers is the resurrection of Jesus. This moment serves as the dividing line in human history; before, we could only look at each other *from a human point of view*; literally, “according to the flesh.” In other words, we regarded one another based on discernable differences: what is their gender, class or nationality; who has a higher or lesser reputation; who possesses more or less power; who is more or less beautiful; who is richer or poorer?

Paul tells the Corinthians that prior to Christ’s resurrection, we even viewed him this way. Jesus was a Galilean, a Jew, a peasant and not a priest. These are human traits; and yet, having been reborn and renewed by God, we now view him through a wholly different lens. That moment of resurrection was the turning point; we have become new creations: one with Christ and therefore united with one another.

In his teachings, Jesus introduced this image of old and new. We are, he told us, to be like new patches put on new clothing, not on the old and worn; and like new wine that is poured into new wineskins, not those casks that are weathered and brittle. What does it look like to be like new patches and new wine? According to Paul, it means that those things that were so important, when we lived in the “old” human flesh, are to be no longer of importance to us.

When we are new creations, we become one with each other. Just as nothing will separate us from the radical love of God – as Paul says in Romans – so, too, nothing should separate us from each other. In his letters to the Corinthians, Paul draws attention to those things that were differences for him and for the Christians in that community. Our reading today challenges us to ask: what are those things that separate us from each other today? What is the old clothing, the aged wineskin that we must give up?¹

We are now a faith with over two-thousand years of tradition; much of which holds for us great significance. We are part of a denomination preparing to hold its 226th General Assembly during which measured changes to our larger church's organization, practices and doctrine will be carefully considered. After church today, this congregation's session will meet using Roberts Rules so that our work will remain decent and orderly. It may not appear we are radical in the way that Paul envisions; it might not seem as if *everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new*.

In a world in which we Christians can so easily fall into literal, fundamentalistic readings of our scriptures, doctrine, and practices – when as State Legislature believed it was necessary to hang a copy of the Ten Commandments on each and every classroom wall when I was a child in Kentucky in the 1980's, *ancient history* – it is ironic that we might so easily minimize the radical implications of Paul's claim:

- *If anyone is in Christ* – well, not really “anyone” but only the special few; like prophets, apostles and martyrs. Surely, Paul doesn't mean everybody, particularly not those who already like things the way they are – for themselves, their families, or the church.
- *There is a new creation* – well, not including big decisions that could cause big changes that might make elders or deacons or big givers unhappy.
- *Everything old has passed away* – well, practicality demands that not “everything” passes away. We've still got this building and the parking lot, bills to pay and events already on the church calendar.
- *See, everything has become new* – well, no, what about all the things we're already doing? Surely, they don't need to become new. Maybe some little new things or a project similar to others we've done before – those would probably be okay.²

Where are the signs that we – the members and friends of this congregation and the larger Christian church – are, indeed, a new creation in Christ? How do we live out Paul's claim that we no longer regard each other from a human point of view – seeing fleshly differences between one another – but instead are united through Christ's resurrection as one people of God?

¹ *New Interpreters' Bible Commentary*, vol. XI

² Frank L. Crouch from *WorkingPreacher.com*

I try hard, as a pastor, to be a non-anxious presence, but this past Thursday afternoon, my patience was beginning to wear thin. The power in the church was out; the temperature inside the building was starting to rise to match levels outside; we were keeping the fridges and freezers shut hoping that the food inside would not spoil; the phones were down and there was no water; and so, we were contemplating whether or not we could have our Caring for Creation children's program and Tables Together dinner the next day; not to mention our food packaging event on Saturday and worship today. Would we have to cancel, reschedule or relocate any or all of these? If we had them, could we do it without lights, water, food, fans, or air conditioning?

Thus, given all that was running through my mind, and not feeling as non-anxious as I try to be, I called the power company back. In my conversation with them earlier in the day, I had been told that there were crews working somewhere in the area but, at that time, they could not give any estimate for when power might be restored. After navigating the menu of options and prompts, I finally spoke to a live representative who told me that, yes, the power would be back on that day. *Sigh of relief*. And it was.

And all the events of this weekend confirmed within me the understanding that, yes, while we might have limited imaginations about what it means to be a new creation, Christ is, indeed, reconciling us to himself by entrusting this ministry of reconciliation to us – cracked and brittle vessels of the treasure within that we might be.

We usually talk about reconciliation in legal, political, or economic terms. Members of a union might engage in reconciliation negotiations with an employer. Before banks did it for us, many of us were taught to reconcile our checkbooks with monthly statements. For Paul – in a way, just like a checkbook – reconciliation is about putting things in right order. It is about restoring balance; bringing together those things that have been separated.³

Reconciliation takes work; it is a practice; it is a ministry. So, it makes sense that we focused our Friday events on the theme of pollination, looking at how honeybees – as well as butterflies and other insects – work together as a hive, using the pollen found in native flowers to create something amazing. Likewise, we engage in ministry – sharing God's gifts of mercy, love, and acceptance; offering our God-given gifts of time, talent, and resources – which reconciles us with one another. Even the four and five year-olds can share God's love with smiles and acts of kindness, becoming reconcilers by the way we treat one another. Everyone who attended in the morning or evening had the opportunity to pack snack bags with notes to be handed out to those in need by *Homeless Hookup CLE*; all had the chance to reconcile – help restore some balance – between those are blessed with food, shelter, and security and those who currently do not.

³ Lucy Lind Hogan from *WorkingPreacher.com*

At yesterday morning's event with *Rise Against Hunger*, David – our leader – reminded us that while the thousands of meals that we packaged will save lives in places of critical need, it is the organization's work in health, education, and development that will help them reach their ultimate goal of eliminating world hunger in our lifetime. As we worked together – each person doing their specific job, serving as one piece of a larger puzzle, everyone equally crucial to the larger goal of efficiently packaging meals – differences between us that we see from a human point of view fade away; and what takes its place is the understanding that we are each and all created in the image of God. Like all other fleshly differences, lack of food need not be a barrier to experiencing the abundance of God's love.

I believe this same principle applies to our Pass-It-On resale store; every volunteer – each of whom brings their own passions, talents, and energies – is helping Christ reconcile the world to himself. And everyone who shops in the store – whether they are in financial need, or want to support the church's ministries with their purchases, or enjoy collecting as a hobby, or will re-sell what they buy – each of them is asked to pay the same price. For some, it may seem like a pittance; for others it is all they can afford. But, again, it is a reminder that, in Christ, we are to be reconciled with one another – no longer separated, but united with and in each other.

In all of these different events and activities, we are allowed to re-imagine the ways we gather and do ministry as the church. Paul describes how we used to only judge things from a human point of view. We wondered, what was best for us? What would give us more power or privilege? But something happens to make us see things from a different point of view? For Paul, it is the resurrection of Jesus, he who God sent as a gift for all of us; making us a new creation and uniting us as one. For each of us, the something that happens is some variation of this new creation. Maybe it is being involved in a ministry combatting hunger or helping the unsheltered. Maybe it is teaching children or caring for the elderly. Maybe it is finding ways for belongings to be reused and repurposed. Maybe it is learning about how to better care for creation; helping, for instance, pollinators thrive.

While new creation means that something old – like used clothing or cracked wineskins – might pass away, it also means something else emerges by reconciling: restoring balance and putting things in proper order. May we ever be ministers of reconciliation: seeking to be the new patch on the new clothes, the new wine that will fill the new wineskin; the new create that can regard others from a no longer just human lens. Thanks be to God. Amen.