

“A New Creation”

“...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (II Corinthians 5:17).

The signs of a new year are unmistakable. Media outlets rank the top stories of the year now ending, prognosticators posit their predictions for the year ahead, and, on a personal level, many of us have considered the changes we will make as we begin 2023. On the edge of a new year, it's natural to step back and take stock; to reflect on where we have been and where we want to go, and in a sense that is exactly what we see in tonight's text from II Corinthians. In this reading the apostle Paul writes boldly, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (II Corinthians 5:17). Here, Paul is describing the new state of being that God has brought about through Jesus Christ, and this new state of being, Paul says, starts with the fact that we are “reconciled” to God.

Reconciliation is an important word in the Bible and it's a word that we must understand in order to apply tonight's text to our lives. You see, in the world, the term “reconciliation” has an almost inanimate or institutional feel. It is used to describe things like a legal settlement, or a balanced financial ledger, but in Scripture, the word reconciliation is very personal, and it is used exclusively to describe restoration in relationships. In the Bible, reconciliation doesn't mean that you simply stop fighting; rather reconciliation is a term of peace and acceptance and, in its purest form, it means rebirth or re-creation.

In Scripture, the Greek word translated “reconcile” means “to bring into harmony” or “to receive into favor,” and it is this definition that shapes tonight's text. Here, Paul tells us that we are reconciled to God, and not only does this mean that we no longer have to fear God's wrath, it also means that we have been brought into a new relationship with God and that something new has been created. Paul tells us that the sin that has spawned hostility and separation from God has “died” with Christ, and that in its place God has created a new person, one who is accepted by God, one who has been received into God's favor, and one who is in harmony with God's will. And yet, this is not the reality we see when we look in the mirror.

Earlier in II Corinthians, Paul writes that as Christians, “we...are being transformed into Jesus' likeness with an ever-increasing glory” (II Corinthians 3:18), yet so often our lives look no different than the lives of those outside the church, and we struggle with the very same problems. We fight with our spouses, we yell at our kids, we find pleasure in gossip, we allow our eyes to take in harmful images, and we fill our mouths with hurtful words. We make well-intentioned plans to turn from temptation and change our ways, and yet, again and again we find ourselves giving in to the same old sinful desires and committing the same tired sins. Instead of experiencing the victorious Christian life we hear so much about, we feel ourselves drowning in a sea of guilt and we find ourselves doubting God's promises. If we truly are the new creation that Paul talks about in this text, then why don't we see it in our lives?

One of the reasons for this very real struggle is that in our striving to improve our lives, we often remove God from the process. In our attempts to master our faults and control our flaws we have missed the very point of Paul's words. Paul writes “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! *All this is from God...*” (II Corinthians 5:18). Did you hear that? “*All this is from God...*” Paul is careful to tell us that our lives as God's people are not based on our efforts to control our desires or master our urges. No, our lives as Christians are based solely on the work of God. In other words, we

don't re-create ourselves. Our new life comes only from the change that God effects in our hearts, and where does the change occur? It occurs at the Cross.

You see, as we return to the Cross of Jesus Christ, we are there – *and in that moment* – reconciled to God. This may seem confusing, but please know that I am not trying to speak in veiled language. When I say that reconciliation comes as we return to the Cross, what I mean, and what I believe Paul means in our text, is that when we admit our sin for what it truly is, and as we honestly tell God who we are and what we have done, and as we move away from our attempts to justify or explain away our actions, and as we stop trying to deal with sin on our own and accept responsibility for our selfish disobedience, it is there that we die with Christ. And in the brokenness of our humble and honest confession, God speaks to us with Words of life that tell us we are reconciled; we are right with God; we are forgiven. And these words change everything! Not only does this message of reconciliation change the way we read and hear Scripture; not only does this message of reconciliation change the way that we intellectually understand our relationship with the Divine; this message of reconciliation changes our hearts, and this change shows itself in our everyday reality.

The Christian life isn't simply a series of failures that God writes off or ignores as we go through the motions of being good church members. The Christian life happens when the message of reconciliation is proclaimed to broken and repentant sinners, and through the miracle of this Word, the Spirit of God transforms hearts and lives. Holy Scripture never separates the change that God brings to our hearts from the change that God creates in our lives, and Paul's clear and simple teaching in today's text affirms the message that our reconciliation with God changes our reality in the world. To put it another way, God's grace to us always results in a life of grace toward others, and because of what God has done for us, our lives will demonstrate God's love as we are "Christ's ambassadors" to the world around us.

How does this happen? It happens when we face up to the problems in our marriage and seek forgiveness from our spouse. It happens when we apologize to our children for our impatience. It happens when we talk to others about the harmful images that have filled our eyes, or the hurtful words that have come from our mouths. It happens when we take responsibility for our sins against others, and it happens when we give the gift of forgiveness to someone who has repented for their sins against us.

The Christian life is not a collection of intellectual knowledge, and it is not a strategy for self-improvement. Instead, it is an everyday miracle through which God forgives us and transforms us into the likeness of His Son. God works through His people, and as we are reconciled to others and live out in our relationships the grace that God has placed into our hearts, the message of the Gospel is once again clothed with flesh and the world is re-created.

As we stand on the edge of a new year it is only natural to step back and reflect on where we have been and where we want to go, and tonight in His Word, God assures you that, no matter what has come before, you are now reconciled to God through Christ. And He also tells you that through God's grace you have the power to share this same message of reconciliation through words and actions that reflect the changed heart that Christ died to give you. Brothers and sisters, the old has gone, the new has come, and by the power of God at work within you, tonight you are a new creation. Go boldly into this new year with the peace of this promise God has made to you tonight. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

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