



“A New Creation”

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**Fourth Sunday in Lent
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2 Corinthians 5:16–21**

Today’s scripture is from a letter written by the apostle Paul to the small Christian community in Corinth around the year 50 CE.

Corinth sounds like an interesting and busy place and, in some respects, a metropolis not so different from the Bay Area. Historians tell us that it was a large and prosperous Roman colony, rebuilt by Julius Caesar shortly before the turn of the millennium and that it was a hub for trade and manufacturing, a major tourist destination, and a mecca for worshippers of Aphrodite and other Greek gods.

Those who study Corinth have made some fascinating discoveries, including the cataloging of numerous inscriptions found among the ancient ruins of the city. These inscriptions, chiseled into stone surfaces, translate as testaments to individual Corinthians describing their contribution to building projects or proclaiming their status in clubs¹.

At one level, the Corinthian inscriptions don’t sound too different from our own building plaques, billboards, and bench ads, but the experts say that the number of inscriptions found in Corinth is staggering and that it appears that all sorts of Corinthians, even slaves, paid for and erected these self-promoting markers. If the experts are correct, Corinth was a city where public-boasting was both an art form and a pathology, a place where public recognition was more important than facts, and where a person’s sense of worth was based on how others saw one’s accomplishments.

It would be nice if we could say the Corinthian Christians weren’t like this but as we know of our own achievement-oriented, star-struck culture, it’s pretty hard to check a lifetime of cultural training at the door of the church. For this reason, the apostle Paul found himself in conflict with the church in Corinth frequently chagrined over their social behaviors, pagan practices, and attitudes. We know Paul wrote at least three letters to the community advising them about these matters, one of which was so upsetting for Paul that he referred to it as his “letter of tears”, written shortly after a rather tense visit with the Corinthians.

¹ Witherington, Ben. *Conflict and Community in Corinth: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995.

In today's letter what is foremost in Paul's mind goes straight to the heart of Corinth's emphasis on public recognition and accomplishment. Paul had heard that other Christian missionaries or "super-apostles" had arrived in Corinth, bearing letters of recommendation. Paul, who had arrived without letters to help found the church and who then lived and worked among the Corinthians for over a year, has also heard that these super-apostles preached a gospel radically different than his own. Theirs was not a Pauline message of humble suffering on behalf of Christ and the Christian message, but more a gospel of personal aggressiveness, rhetorical grandeur, and spiritual superiority, all characteristics that we can imagine would be quite appealing to the status-conscious Corinthians².

In his letter, Paul provides the Corinthians with his response to the visit of these "super-apostles" and their credentials. Christians, he says, no longer evaluate others on the basis of their accomplishments, their position, or who their friends are. Old standards of judgment—be they race, wealth, or title—are gone, null and void in a world where we see all people as Christ saw them. As Paul says:

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:
everything old has passed away;
see, everything has become new!

In the process of addressing what true ministry is and who true ministers are, Paul gives us this gift, a theological statement so beautiful, thought-provoking, and powerful that it has become a foundation of what it means to be Christian. In lauding the new creation, Paul joins a host of witnesses who tell us our God is not only a creator, but a re-creator, one who will make all things new on our behalf.

Hear, for example, the words of the prophet Isaiah to the captured Israelites in Babylon six centuries before Christ:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah comforts his people with familiar images from their Exodus, a vivid reminder that what God has done before, God will do again³.

Hear the words of John of Patmos in Revelation painting a picture of a new heaven, new earth, and New Jerusalem, where a voice from a heavenly throne tells the

² Newsom, Carol A. and Sharon H. Ringe, Editors. *The Women's Bible Commentary*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p331.

³ Isaiah 43:18-19 NRSV

people that God will dwell among them and console them, saying: “See, I am making all things new.”⁴

Hear the obscure poet Pauline T. who penned these lines in 1868, ⁵dear to us now as the hauntingly-beautiful hymn *My Life Flows On in Endless Song*:

My life flows on in endless song:
Above earth's lamentation,
I catch the sweet, tho' far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.
Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul—
How can I keep from singing?

These images of God's new creation—a way through the wilderness, a river in the desert, new heaven, new earth, a sweet, though far-off hymn—are as compelling as Paul's perception of and elation in the idea of a new creation. There is something here that resonates in our hearts.

Last weekend, we had another witness for the power of “new creation” at our “Love Makes a Family” celebration. On Saturday afternoon, Jenifer Miller read her children's book *The Turtlebees of Turkledorf*⁶. Turkledorf, if you haven't heard, is a place where the yellow, the blue, and the red fuzzy-headed turtle-like creatures called turtlebees live color-separated lives right down to flags on their houses until the day a red turtlebee needs to attend a blue turtlebee school. And it's a place where the different-colored turtlebees don't intermarry until the red poppen falls in love in with a blue mokken. And it's a place where turtlebees believe poppens should only marry mokkens until the day a two-poppen family shows up. And happily, Turkledorf is a place where turtlebees come to accept change and learn to respect differences.

As we listened to Jenifer's story, we couldn't help thinking that these turtlebees were a little bit odd, getting all upset about yellow, blue, and red color separation and two-poppen and two-mokken families. Because turtlebees aren't human, it was easier for us to imagine that they were being silly and foolish and unfair. Jenifer's new creation gives insight into our own world by helping us see beyond our human concerns with race and orientation.

But let us leave Turkledorf and return to ancient Corinth. For Paul, God is the author of this new creation, and it begins with Christ and the offering of his life. We enter the new creation when we no longer see Christ as human but as the one who gave his life for everyone. And because we see Christ this way, we see others not as

⁴ Revelation 21:1-5 NRSV

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_Can_I_Keep_from_Singing%3F; accessed March 11, 2010

⁶ ©2008 Jenifer Ingerman Miller

humans alone, but as beings for whom Christ gave his life. And it is this act, this seeing of others as “in Christ” that makes all things and all people new in Paul’s theology.

For Paul, this is salvation. To see ourselves, others, and the world as new saves us from old ways of being that would hurt and destroy us. It liberates us from the past and it draws us to God. It gives us a great and amazing thing to tell the world. *All things are new!*

I puzzle over the words in Paul’s letter: If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. What does it mean to be “in Christ”? How does anyone, particularly someone living not hundreds, but thousands of years after Corinth has faded away, get “in Christ” and into the new creation? How do we make such a beautiful and powerful idea real for ourselves?

I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s about the imagination. You can’t see what’s new in the world until you stop looking at what’s old. You can’t see how a humble tent maker like Paul can save the world until you see how little a letter of recommendation will buy you. You can’t see how the Israelites will ever leave Babylon until you imagine a way through the wilderness. You can’t see that love makes a family until you see the love of a two-poppen Turklebee family. Believing in a new creation is about seeing the mountains beyond valleys, it’s about standing in the darkest part of your life and seeing salvation as just around the corner, it’s about seeing Easter beyond Lent.

I stand here a far cry from where I was two or three years ago. On the face of it, I am putting away an old career in public policy and beginning a new calling in ministry. I am putting away old books, old values, and old ways of being. Gone are my concerns about accomplishment and money. In their place is this odd fascination for puzzling over the Bible and trying to figure out what these ancient texts mean to us now. I find myself listening for God, hoping for a word or two of guidance. And at times I feel this strange elation that what I want to do is lining up with what I’m doing. I’ve decided that either I’m crazy or I’m a new creation.

And as Paul says, I see others differently now. I look around this room and I realize I’m not sure what most of you do for work or money, or what kind of car you own, or if you have a wide-screen television. But I know that there isn’t a person here who hasn’t been through some kind of amazing transformation, like surviving the loss of someone you loved, forgiving those who have hurt you, becoming clean and sober, starting a new career or new family, recovering your mental, physical or spiritual health, or graciously coming to terms with what it means to live as well as you can in the fragile and aging bodies God has given us. You are all new creations, new and renewing yourselves through your faith.

And because you are new, our church is new as well, which is saying a lot for this body of Christ formed in a small chapel in the middle of the 19th century. We are

constantly changing and finding new ways to meet the needs of our members and of our community. Just this year alone, we started a new fellowship for our single women, kicked off a small group ministry, created a new performing art benefit series, and took an active stand in our community for gay inclusion and celebrated the rich diversity of our families. Not everything here is new, but everything that is good, righteous, and growing is a testament to the faith and commitment of this congregation to worshipping God and following Christ.

In Christ, through Christ, in our wonder and amazement about who Christ was and is and will be, we are all new creations, born to see each other, born to see this world as God's gracious gift to us.

My friends, Easter is that mountain just beyond the valley. Easter is the peace of Christ, a fountain ever-springing, Easter is a new creation.

Amen.