

A New Way of Living

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

There is a splendid story that illustrates the centrality of this text. It is reported that Karl Barth was once asked what he would say to Adolf Hitler if he ever had the chance to meet the one who was destroying Europe and who would ruin the whole world if he were not stopped. Barth's questioner assumed that he would offer a hell-fire judgment against Hitler's awful politics of destruction. Barth replied that he would do nothing other than quote Romans 5:8: "While we still were sinners, Christ died for us." Only the unparalleled mercy and forgiveness of God, the abundant gladness and grace of the gospel, could have prompted the Führer's genuine repentance. To have accused him, though justly, of his manifold abominations would have prompted Hitler's self-righteous defense, his angry justification of his allegedly "necessary" deeds.

If any of us were brought to a similar place and opportunity, I would hope to have the presence of mind to utter these words: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.... We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:19-20 RSV). The key to this grandest of affirmations may well lie at the beginning of our text. There Paul declares that he will no longer look upon any other person from a human standpoint, just as he has learned to behold Christ himself as the incarnate God, not simply as a Nazarene rabbi. Because once we have recognized Jesus to be the Savior of the world, we cannot limit our estimate of other human beings—the old or young, exploiters or murderers, terrorists or militarists, frauds or failures—as dwelling beyond God's reach. We cannot see any person as anything other than a creature for whom Christ has died and risen, and thus as one meant also to become "a new creation."

Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his splendid little treatise titled *Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved?* argues that if we deny this hope, then we have no right to confidence in our own salvation. To give up hope for any other person, no matter how wretched their condition may be, is also to give up hope for ourselves. How can we presuppose our own final deliverance from human wretchedness into divine worthiness, while assuming that others cannot be similarly saved? Balthasar also points out that at no time or place in its entire history has the church declared anyone to be definitively damned—not even Judas or Rahab the harlot. By contrast, it has declared many souls to be definitively saved, though not of course presuming on the final judgment of God.

On Friday I attended a graduation ceremony of Detroit, minority males. Many would be in jail or return to jail if not for a program called Flip the Script. My colleague Keith Bennett and his staff see each person as a valuable part of the community and help them to change their lives and contribute to society. In the same way my colleague sees these young men, Paul encourages us to see every person that was made in the image of God.

Saints are those who live in the new creation, since the old one has ended. As Christians we do not look for the end times. We are already living in the final age, the one inaugurated by Christ's life and teaching, his death and resurrection. The kingdom of God is already in our midst, eagerly yearning for its completion.

We are "ambassadors for Christ." As emissaries and envoys of the gospel, we are not saddled with a harsh duty but given the greatest of all honors. (Ralph C. Wood)

It is because Paul is in Christ that there is a new creation. Everything old to him is now new—mourning and crying and pain are no more. A life of persecuting Christians has given way to a life of pursuing Christ, the persecution doubling back on him hardly a concern. When grace unlevels Christians like this, they find

themselves singing in a jail cell like Paul. Everything is now oriented from a God-drenched point of view, even though they once saw everything from a human one. They start describing whole new worlds, worlds that are conceived in imagination, but birthed by lives of faithful discipleship.

New creation, however, is conceived in imagination—and imagination begins in prayer, in the images that God plants within us. Prayer, of course, begins in holy silence. So we need to stop talking and start listening, and begin to interpret the subtle movements in our hearts and spirits, then we will start to hear the call of the new creation. We will stop seeing the world from a human point of view; and we will start seeing it with the eyes of Christ.

What marvelous visions await. In prayer, the church can see a world where death and pain and mourning are no more; a world free from addictions; a world where mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, find love where there was mistrust; a world where marriages are joys instead of burdens; a world where everyone has a decent place to live; a world where children can be taught in safety by teachers who do not cry themselves to sleep; a world where people do not suffer in pain because medication is too costly; a world where women are not coerced into lives they cannot bear; a world where children do not settle wars that men create; a world where imagination is as powerful as market indicators and machine guns; a world where everything becomes new by an act of faith, the act of trusting that the futures God whispers to the church can be brought into being. (Casey Thompson)

I guess I need to attend the Michigan Clergy retreat next month where the spiritual guide will teach us to listen!

Our new way of living involves the Ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation goes hand in hand with forgiveness. We are reconciled because we know ourselves to be forgiven. Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote, "Without forgiveness there can be no future for a relationship between individuals or within and between nations."

Those who, like Archbishop Tutu, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, or Brother Roger of Taizé, have engaged this path know that the future depends on this ministry. The future for individuals, for nations, for humanity, and for the earth will depend not on staking claims, not on protecting "our" rights, not in guarding boundaries, not in waging war, but in this difficult discipline of reconciling forgiveness.

Brother Roger of Taizé embodied this vision of reconciliation in the community he founded at Taizé. Early on he wrote in *The Rule of Taizé*, "Never resign yourself to the scandal of the separation of Christians, all who so readily confess love for their neighbor, and yet remain divided. Be consumed with burning zeal for the unity of the Body of Christ." Brother Roger called the division among Christians a scandal, something that continually divides the body of Christ. The division of Christians nails Jesus back onto the cross.

Our new way of living must also be about loving our neighbor. The movement of love, the ministry of reconciliation, does not come out of our own strength, nor does it depend on our own effort. It is God who has cleared the way by reconciling all of us to God and invited us into this large, generous vision of humanity and creation.

We become the "righteousness of God" through the encounter with Christ in the other, in the neighbor, in the person sitting next to me or in front of me or behind me in the pew, in the person standing in the street, in the beggar, in the refugee, in all those calling for help. As ambassadors, we are called out into the street. As a community of faith, we are called to live out our ministry, to become an excitement of hope in the place God has given us, letting God's future break into the world. (Dirk G. Lange)

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