

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
January 1, 2023
2 Corinthians 5: 11-21

As you know by now, I preach primarily from the gospels and from the Old Testament. I do, however, try to preach from an epistle at least once a year. So, I thought I would get it out of the way early, here on January 1st. Now, New Year Day is not really a religious holiday, it does not feature in the liturgical calendar. And yet, the themes of newness, of personal change and transformation are very much biblical themes. In our Corinthians reading, Paul speaks of this sense of newness, of a radical change of the old passing away and the new emerging.

Now, I should say, I don't really do New Years. I was in bed before ten O'Clock last night. I have never really made my goals around the rather arbitrary turning of the new year. But I understand the tradition, of people turning over a new leaf, of hoping for new fortune with the turning of the year, and taking new directions. People make resolutions for the new year, buy exercise equipment, or make a list of books they intend to read and such things. I don't put a lot of stock in New Year, as if this arbitrary day has the power to change our substances.

The fact that most exercise equipment purchased around new year is either collecting dust or on Craigslist by June, and that most resolutions are discarded along the way confirms my disinterest with such lofty promises made around New Year day. It takes more than the turning of the calendar to effect change in us. It usually takes multiple factors coming together to generate the impetus and staying power of change and growth and development. Nonetheless, I do realize that even if resolutions and goals are not met, they sometimes at least get us moving in a direction.

Now, despite my cynicism, Paul is a model of great personal and transformational change. Dramatic change. I suspect it garnished awe at times, the type of person who might get invited on talk-shows nowadays. He went from persecuting, killing and trying to squelch followers of the way to becoming a follower of the way himself, then becoming one of the primary leaders of the movement. He was blinded by the light, literally, knocked off his horse. The return of his sight coincided with a radical change in his person, faith, vocation.

Now such dramatic change may draw a level of greater scrutiny as well. Some may question whether such radical change could be authentic, lasting, trustworthy. I imagine it garnishes both kinds of attention, awe and skepticism. Skepticism as in

wondering if such change is authentic, and if it is lasting. I think of Ananias in the book of Acts. God gives him a vision and tells him to go meet Paul shortly after Paul's conversion and Ananias responds with trepidation and concern, knowing the stories of what this man had done. And God wants him to go meet Paul, trusting that Paul is different, completely changed. It is a gamble that if wrong means Ananias is dead.

And in our reading this morning, I hear a tension in Paul's train of thought. It is the tension around when and in what way it is appropriate to call attention to oneself. There is a fine line between being an example of what Christ can do in one's life and being arrogant and self-involved. There is a fine line between drawing attention to one's good, and, at the same time inadvertently drawing light to one's flaws, or the areas where we are still in need of change, or calling attention to the piles of unrealized new year resolutions. Paul is calling attention to himself and to other leaders, but trying to do so in a way that lifts up the change Christ can bring, rather than calling attention to himself and to his lingering flaws. "We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart."

I like Paul, but he feels a little bit like an older brother at times. He talks about himself too much. He means well, but he tries so hard at times that I am a little embarrassed for him. He comes off as arrogant often times. He feels too much like Walt Whitman. He uses too many words, convoluted sentences, meandering arguments, relies too much on prepositions. But, despite my gripes with Paul, his endearing qualities include a persistent and unmovable desire to know Christ and a comparable persistent and unmovable desire that others might know Christ. "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died.¹⁵ And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them." He knew change in his own life, and believes in the power of Christ to change others as well.

Paul believes in the power to change. Even though that old arrogance and need to be right and to make everyone else conform clearly carries through for Paul, he has changed significantly. Christ has reconciled him to God, who was once so far off and misdirected. He has indeed changed, and the trajectory of his life is completely different. Paul believes in the power of the new overcoming the old - that one can both be reconciled to God, and be made new through Christ, and that the atrocities of the past can truly be forgiven and not held against him. And therefore, he implores others, and he suggests that we all are called to reconciled to God in this

way. That all are invited to be forgiven in this way, that we all are called to be ambassadors, imploring others to be reconciled to God.

To believe that someone can be forgiven and given a clean slate requires a new way of thinking. Especially if like Paul one's past includes leading a cleansing effort, killing and violently deterring followers of a religious movement. A new way of thinking that enables us to see him differently. Paul says, "From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Despite our cynicism or skepticism, transformation is possible in Christ.

Now, after living in the academic realm for well over a decade, I'm a little conditioned to ask some questions, to demand a little more precision in the use of words, to be more narrow in the assertions we are making. And so I want to ask Paul what he means by the new, and what it means for the old to pass away? What qualifies as new? Do we really shed all traces of the past? Are we talking about something different than what we have always known? Or are we talking about a slight reconfiguration of what we have always known?

After all, personal change or transformation does not entail some complete falling away of the old. We can extol some change in a friend, even while rolling our eyes at them because we have known them for so long, and still see the threads that remain. Even if we change dramatically, we still retain some essentialness to our self, don't we? In fact, if you needed a medical procedure, perhaps brain surgery or some dramatic intervention, and the doctor told you that it may change your personality, that you may lose your memories, and emerge as a different person, but be alive, would you hesitate? How much change is too much change? No, we tend to rely on the fact that interventions, medical or otherwise, will retain our primary identity and improve us in the long run, not change us into something unrecognizable.

So, what is this "new" for Paul? It is a new that is rooted in reconciliation to God. That through Christ, something happens that could not have happened on our own, no matter how many resolutions we make. God offers something that is both unmerited and new. We get to start on a trajectory whether we have deserved it or not. We may not have earned it. We may have failed so many new year resolutions that no one would take us seriously, and yet God says, because of Christ, you get to start anew, you don't have to have earned it or proved it.

And because this new start is based on a different premise, maybe this is why Paul says that we have to stop thinking in our normal human ways of thinking. We no longer regard people from a human point of view, but are able to see the new, able to accept that people can become new.

But it is not easy, starting over, beginning anew, not being taken over by the voices both in our head and by those around us that say they know who we are, that we cannot change. If it was easy, we would not need to implore both ourselves and others. If it was easy, we wouldn't need ardent ambassadors entreating us.

In fact, anyone in a helping profession is very familiar with a certain paradigm, of helping someone to effect change in their life, and as things seem to be moving in the right direction, the person pulls back, reverts, self-sabotages. We are often quite scared and untrusting of the new. Especially when life and the natural changes of getting old exact their own unweilding changes upon us. We tend to pull back from the new, no more changes, thank you. We want the familiar, familiar rhythms, patterns, reminders of a familiar world.

In this way, Paul's declaration may not be the best news. It may confront and call us to renewal – that in Christ, we are called to embrace and pursue the new, reconciliation with God, a new trajectory of a forgiven person now concerned with others being reconciled to God.

Well, I am started to meander in Pauline fashion, so let me go back to that question for another moment, about what we mean by the new. It makes me think of literary and poetic theory, for this question comes up often around conceptions of literary invention, or poetic genius, or the sublime – about what it means to create something new, and what is happening there. And the long and short of it, at least in contemporary theory and thought, is that what we are really doing is not creating something new out of the ether, we are not creating a new substance altogether. Rather, we are taking all that we have learned and ingested along the way, and are reconfiguring it in new or unique way that causes us to see everything else with new eyes, thus giving the impression of a type of genius, or the sublime.

I think this is true of us as persons as well. That we are not becoming something totally unknown, but change and reconciliation and transformation are reconfiguring the pieces of our lives and selves into a pattern of wholeness. Reconfiguring the parts of our selves so that we no longer need to fear and protect ourselves through self-destructive patterns, or hide ourselves from others, or numb ourselves, or hurt or harm one another. Now yes, some things have to go along the way, and some new things or patterns have to be taken on, but we are not

becoming something other than ourselves, something other than the self created in the image of God.

Oh God who is not bound to time
we know ourselves in pieces
at various ages and evolving stages-
every point in our lives
shaping us into whom we were meant to be.

We are constantly emerging,
greeting a new self with every passing year,
shedding old skin and exploring a person we do not yet know.

Now, there are times when external circumstances demand that we change, that we seek that reconciliation, that we shed the old and pursue the new. It may be because you have hit rock bottom in some way, or that a relationship breaks under some strain, or the consequences of actions confront in one way or another, or a natural or political or economic disaster forces you away from what you have always known.

But Paul extends the reach of his comments to include all of us, even those of us who are functioning alright and are not being confronted with such external constraints. He suggests that all are called to be “in Christ.” We all are called to find our identity through our connection with Christ, to be reconciled to God in a manner that reconfigures our identity in such a way that causes us to see everything new, that we no longer see ourselves or other people from “human points of view.” We all are called to be new creations, the old passing away. And in that discovery, in that reconfiguration, we might be made into passionate ambassadors, desiring all to be reconciled to God.

Only You, Lord, see our full selves from beginning to end,
uninterrupted by time.
When You say the old is gone and the new has come,
You are referring not to age or time but to our eternal identities,
unchanging and preserved by Your Holy Spirit.

As we ring in this new year, may Paul’s words ring in our ears, that we are both invited and called to be new creations, reconciled to God, and working for the reconciliation of all. Even if God hasn’t knocked us off our horses, like God did to Paul, let us hear God pleading with us through that persistent voice of Paul, pleading, imploring, entreating.

“we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

And all God’s people said...

The Ministry of Reconciliation

¹¹ Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. ¹² We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. ¹³ For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴ For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.