

New Beginnings

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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2 Corinthians 5:16-21 (NRSV)

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.

CHANGE, INSIDE AND OUT

It happens every year. There was yet another article in the newspaper about New Year's resolutions. This year's article was about finding the "glue" to make our resolutions about weight control stick.

There was nothing remarkable about the article; they were the same old suggestions that we didn't follow last year. But, I'm sure that many of us read the article anyway. We're desperate to get rid of those ten extra pounds gained from our holiday meals. We're ready to find the glue that will make our resolutions stick instead of the pounds. Good luck to us all on that one.

But, my sermon today is not about weight control or a new exercise program. I'm not interested in changing us on the outside. I'm interested in changing us on the inside.

w even if you don't have a spiritual bone in your body there are some good reasons to forgive others with no strings attached. It's better for us from a mental health standpoint. It's better for us physically. We'll live longer if we can put the past behind us.

But, there's another more important reason to forgive and forget.

It's the only way to move forward as a Christian. Jesus said that an important part of any prayer is to forgive those who have wronged us even as we accept God's forgiveness; you know what I mean, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

When we look at ourselves and others through the eyes of forgiveness, we look at them not from a human standpoint but from the standpoint of the Savior who said to his enemies on the cross, "Father, forgive them."

A talented minister was betrayed by another friend who was also a minister. The betrayal was so deep that this minister had to be hospitalized for clinical depression. The quality of his ministry deteriorated along with his health.

Eventually he experienced a renewal of his life and his ministry. After his retirement he did mission work in Africa and became a happier person. But, he always worried about this friend who had betrayed him.

Finally, he called this man up and worked it out. The reconciliation was a great relief to him. Not long after this he died, but friends said that this one action was one of the best things that ever happened to him in his later years. Maybe for his life to be complete this reconciliation had to happen.

Is there someone that you need to forgive?

Perhaps you need to also be reconciled in order for your life to be complete.

A NEW CREATION

According to Paul, one of the ways to describe what we do as followers of Christ is to say that we are “ministers of reconciliation.” God has introduced a whole new element into the world that is changing everything.

God in Christ refused to retaliate. He refused to give us what we deserve, and that introduced a whole new way of looking at things, an outpouring of forgiveness and love that is in the process of changing the world. That process continues to this very day.

According to Paul, it’s a whole new world, a whole new creation when Christ comes into our lives.

Paul knew what he was talking about.

At one time he looked at the world very differently. He was a proud, religious leader. He saw those who followed the humble way of Christ as a threat to true religion. In fact his main mission in life was to persecute and imprison those who were Christians.

But, when Paul met Christ on the road to Damascus, he changed. He changed completely.

The things he used to value, his education and his religious credentials, those things were like garbage in comparison to the new life that was his in Christ Jesus. Instead of viewing the world through the lens of law and judgment, Paul now viewed the world through the lens of forgiveness and grace. He was blinded by the light of God’s grace so he could see the world with new eyes.

I am convinced that all of us need to go through the process that Paul experienced on the road to Damascus. Instead of continuing on the road to perdition, we need to be turned around. We need to be stopped in our tracks by the light of overwhelming grace. We need to be blinded so that we can see.

Though Paul’s conversion began dramatically, the real test of true faith is not the drama of the initial encounter but the faithfulness of our daily walk. To be in Christ is to be a new creation, but everyday is a new day to be conformed to the image of Christ, to change in some way.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians that he was crucified with Christ, that it was no longer he who lived but Christ who lived in him. (Galatians 2:19-21) But, this identity change was also a daily struggle. Paul said that the life he now lived “in the flesh” he lived by faith in the Son of God who loved him and gave his life for him.

We talk about making New Year’s resolutions, but I think that’s too long term. I think we need new day resolutions. Each day is a new day to embrace the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and then bring that grace to others.

AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST

In today's lesson Paul said that "we are ambassadors for Christ." God is making his appeal through us. We are God's spokesmen.

Ambassadors, of course, are official representatives sent on behalf of one country to another. And the work of an ambassador is often difficult. For example, ambassadors from our country may be called upon to live in places where the customs are strange and the resources are few.

Sometimes in these foreign countries there is even hostility toward the values we represent. As we learned in Iran and in other places, ambassadors and other foreign diplomats can be subject to violence.

But, there are people who are willing to take these difficult assignments because they believe the interests of our country should be represented all over the world. The existence of our embassy in a foreign land is, in a way, a statement about who we are and what we believe.

In the same way, we are the official representatives for the kingdom of God in this world. The church is a kind of embassy in a foreign land, and we are ambassadors for Christ. We seek to embody the kingdom of God and so influence the world for Christ.

Now, sometimes, of course ambassadors and those who make foreign policy are not successful in conveying the noblest and highest ideals of our country. When we do not convey what is best about our country, our influence and respect is lessened in the world.

And sometimes the church and Christians do not convey the message of Christ's kingdom either. Sometimes our actions are a denial of our Christian identity and what we are called to be.

And when that happens, the Kingdom of God is harmed. We bring dishonor to the name of Christ.

But, even when we fail, we need not remain mired in the mud.

THE POWER OF A PARDON

This past week Gerald Ford died. Gerald Ford was the only American President who was not elected. As many of us remember he took over after President Nixon resigned due to the Watergate scandal.

As you might imagine Ford was remembered sympathetically by many people this past week. He was a calm steady presence when we needed one.

But, there was one action that he took that was very controversial and probably cost him the opportunity to be elected President. After much soul searching about the ethics of the decision with advisors and a minister from Michigan, he decided that the only way for the country to move forward was for him to pardon former President Nixon for his role in Watergate.

For Ford this decision was a spiritual as well as a political decision. He felt like this was the only way that the country could focus on more positive things. And so he sacrificed his own political ambitions for the greater good.

Many years later Gerald Ford was given a Profile of Courage award for his decision to pardon Nixon. Carolyn Kennedy presented the award, and Senator Ted Kennedy spoke. He said something like,

“I too was one of those who opposed the decision to pardon former President Nixon. But, time has a way of changing our perspective and now I believe that it was the right decision. It was a courageous decision that the country needed at that time.”

President Ford graciously acknowledged Senator Kennedy’s words with a nod of the head, and I thought to myself, “This is what the Bible means when it talks about the ministry of reconciliation. This is what it means to be an ambassador for Christ.”

And this is what our country, our church, and our families need this year more than ever. We need to do the hard work of forgiveness so that we can move on to doing the work of the Kingdom of God.

Each new year and each new day brings the possibility that we can be recreated in the image of Christ, that forgiveness and love can overcome our desire for revenge and hate, that we can be all that we are called to be in Christ Jesus.

Each day is a blank slate on which we write what is really important to us by our actions. This year let the old pass away and the new come. In Jesus Christ we are a new creation.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)

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