

Lent IV
Year C

II Cor. 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“Whoever is in Christ...new creation.” A succinct statement if there ever was one. That’s what it actually says in the original, ancient Greek text. There’s no subject or verb. The verse reads simply, “Whoever is in Christ...new creation.” One wonders if Paul was so excited by this insight that he just scribbled this stumbling sentence. Or maybe he was emotional. After all, it has been said that this letter we call Second Corinthians is as many as five fragments written to a church with whom Paul has had a fiery relationship.

Fortunately, he elaborates on his insight in several other letters to different churches [Gal. 3:27; Eph. 2:10; Rom. 6:3-5], so we can expand on his thoughts. But of these brief words scholars have written, “this memorable passage is the culminating point of the Apostle’s teaching...and is perhaps the profoundest and most important utterance in the whole of his writings.”¹ Even today Paul’s statement is both a bold perspective on the world and a trajectory for our own purpose in this world. Hear again the words written to a church beset by a crisis of conscience: “If anyone is in Christ...new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

A superficial interpretation of this verse would read something like the words from the 1979 musical “All That Jazz”:

“Don’t throw the past away
You might need it some rainy day
Dreams can come true again
When everything old is new again.”

But no, Paul is not reinvigorating the past. He’s not resuscitating a corpse. He’s not saying every bit of our experience can become new. On the contrary, he is saying something much more dramatic.

Modern scholars have translated this passage in a variety of ways: “If anyone is in Christ THERE IS a new creation.”² “If any man be in Christ, HE is a new creature.”³ “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.”⁴ “For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation.”⁵ The New English Version reads, “When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world,” but provides in a footnote “When anyone is united to Christ, he is a new creature.” The Good News Bible gets even more personal: “When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being.”

¹ C. R. Ball, *Preliminary Studies on N.T.* p. 143.

² New Revised Standard Version.

³ King James Version.

⁴ Revised Standard Version and the New American Version.

⁵ Jerusalem Bible.

So which is it? What did Paul mean? That one united to Christ is a new creature or one is living in a new world? Is he talking about private experience or universal perception? Is he turning the tables on reality? He meant all these things, and more. In other words, that someone who is in Christ lives in a new creation; that someone is a new creation; and for that someone, there will always be a new creation. Everyday there will be movement toward wholeness. The trajectory and the purpose are joined.

For the old world is gone. Something unexpected has pierced our world, split the foundations of our existence by the instrument of a cross. The cross, writes Paul, is about the death of the cosmos, the death of the world. The cross has driven a spike into the very center of being and split it apart. Thereafter, nothing is the same. Yes, the cross is about the death of the old world, but it is also about the dawn of a new genesis; for it brings about rebirth. A war of liberation has begun where humankind's flesh and spirit are no longer allies united against God's Spirit, for that old alliance has been crucified. Living in Christ means Jesus is part of our life and we are part of His, that we are part of Jesus' death and He is part of ours, that we are a community of God's own Being; and the only question left is, "What are you going to do with your one, wild, precious life?"⁶

The answer to that question is not easy, for we are free. From the moment of our baptism into Christ's life and death [Romans 6:3-5], we journey through the transitions of life toward God, a procession toward meaning whose twists and turns threaten to throw us back into a war against God. T.S. Eliot expresses the mystery of this journey in these words:

"What you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And is altered in fulfillment."⁷

In other words, our purpose is beyond our imaginings. Our goal with no remainder is God who is calling us to that end.

Henry Nouwen, the Dutch theologian and writer, wrote of his long, spiritual adventure in these words:

"For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried hard to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life---pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures---and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself. I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was close to despair.

⁶ Poet Mary Oliver.

⁷ *Little Gidding*

“Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not ‘How am I to find God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be found by him?’ The question is not ‘How am I to know God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be known by God?’ And, finally, the question is not ‘How am I to love God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be loved by God?’ God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home.”⁸

Another poet wrote of the war of the old self with the self God created us to be in these words: “There was a man who had two sons.” Two sons, or two sides of one personality? Both at war with the self God created us to be. The younger of the sons said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country....”

This morning’s gospel illustrates vividly that old world where human flesh and human spirit are united against the Spirit of God. The parable commonly known as The Prodigal Son should really be titled the parable of The Forgiving Father, a father who takes the initiative for a new creation. He is not the defender of an entrenched position. He is the protagonist against just such a position. His words are not the effect of a conflict in which he finds himself. His words are the cause of that conflict, that setting, that world. The attitude of the father and his risk-taking actions create a crisis, a crisis of change with apocalyptic proportions.

Apocalyptic writing forecasts the ultimate destiny of the world, and this parable is full of words used in Jewish apocalyptic literature to describe the tribulations of the Last Days. For a Jew to consider eating the food of pigs is an extreme action but its alternative is a word meaning great famine. The sacrificial fatted calf refers to the apocalyptic animal of Ezekiel. The word for “lost” indicates the end of the world. And on and on the nuances of the story tell us of the end. The older brother sees the celebration of the Last Days in all the things done for the younger son. They are like the Messianic Banquet. And he stands outside in anger.

The younger son has returned home expecting to determine his own status within the family. He thinks he’ll be a slave. The older son seeks to determine his position within the household, rigidly ordering the life he has lived these many years. But the father cuts through both their attempts to determine relationships and creates an entirely new situation. In both sons we can see that what they thought they came for is only a shell, a husk of meaning from which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled, if at all. Either they had no purpose or the purpose was beyond the end they figured and is altered in fulfillment.

⁸ *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*

In spite of our own attempts to become the determiners of our own existence, God acts anew in every situation. Like the two sons, our flesh and spirit unite to regulate the amount of involvement we will allow God to have in our lives; but God takes the risk of reaching out to us in reconciliation.

The hunger of God for his people, his longing for the work of his hands, creates a bond not made for breaking. No matter what our needs or changed circumstances, it is the nature of God to break into our lives, overturn our presuppositions of how things must be, if necessary throw everything off balance, to meet us where we are with ever-new creation.

“However vast our soul’s despair, God’s grace does not desert us. His hand can reach us everywhere, despite how sin may hurt us. Our Savior and good Shepherd, he will come and set His people free from sin and degradation.”⁹

For God is our faithful deliverer. In Christ we have seen his faithfulness; and trusting in that faithfulness, we live. Whoever is in Christ...new creation.

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⁹ David Hurd, *On Psalm 130*, based on Martin Luther’s tune and text, *Aus Tiefer Not*