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Weekend of Sunday, June 13, 2021
3rd Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 11/Proper 6/Year B
First Reading: Ezekiel 17:22-24
Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:6-17
Gospel Reading: Mark 4:26-34
Sermon Title: “We Are a New Creation!”

Theme

Paul encourages believers to live by faith and not by sight. We do not consider Jesus from a human perspective but through the eyes of faith, believing he died for all and was raised. All who are in Christ are now in God’s new creation.

Text

⁶So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

[¹¹Therefore, 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. ¹²We 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. ¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.] ¹⁴For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And 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.

¹⁶From 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. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Sermon

During June, I am preaching a short sermon series based on the Readings from 2nd Corinthians. Along the way, I intend to teach you a little bit about the apostle Paul the author of the two letters to the Corinthians, Corinth the city and its people, some surprising theories about the two letters that are in the New Testament, and some of the issues that Paul faced with the Corinthian fellowship. So let's get started:

Paul

I mentioned last week that the pre-conversion Paul, known as Saul, was a Pharisee. As Saul, he made it his mission to persecute the Christian movement. He saw this as his godly service to the LORD, until his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. In Saul, the resurrected Lord Jesus saw someone whose passion he could use to build his church. Jesus broke Saul's misguided spirit, gave him the new name of Paul, and put him in contact with godly disciples who could teach him the truth of the Gospel. Bible scholars think his conversion happened somewhere between 34 and 37 CE. By the time the Corinthian church was founded in 53 or 54 CE, Paul was a seasoned apostle for the Lord Jesus and his church.

Corinth

I mentioned last week that Corinth was an important commercial and military community located on an isthmus, but I didn't tell you what an isthmus is. An isthmus is a narrow strip of land with sea on either side, forming a land bridge between two larger areas of land. In the case of the Corinthian isthmus, which is just less than four miles wide, the idea of digging a canal through the isthmus was first conceived in the seventh century BCE as a way to create a shortcut saving shipping time to sail all the way around the Peloponnese, but a lack of canal digging technology frustrated the project. During Paul's time, the isthmus was traversed by rolling ships across logs. There were several other attempts to complete a canal over the hundreds of years, but the present Corinth Canal was finally completed in 1893. So geographically, you can see why Corinth was an important commercial and military community.

The Letters

You might recall that last week I blew your mind when I told you that though we have just two of Paul's letters to the Corinthians in the canon of scripture, there is evidence that Paul wrote five letters to the Corinthians. Two of them were

completely lost, letters referred to as A and C. And what we know of as Second Corinthians is likely made up of two letters D and E. And then I taught you a Greek word, *adiaphora*, and taught you that the word means *stuff that doesn't matter* and told you to apply that to this new mind-blowing information.

So today's reading, and all the featured readings for this June series, come from letter D or the first nine chapters of Second Corinthians. Today's sermon is entitled, "*We Are a New Creation!*" Let's get started.

It occurs to me that sometimes Paul writes in riddles, or at least they sound that way to me. For example, in verse 6 and 7 he wrote,

⁶while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.

What he wrote here is this idea that builds on what he wrote in last week's reading, which was affirming this idea of an afterlife, heaven, life eternal. Perhaps you will remember me telling you that that concept was not widely held in Judaism let alone by the other pagan religions in Corinth. So he affirmed the concept last week and then this week he builds on it by writing that while we human beings are both spiritual and temporal at the same time, we are spiritual beings over and above our temporal beings (temporal meaning earthly, worldly, mortal, human). That is because our temporal beings are being wasted away. We are all dying. Short of the Lord returning during our lifetime, none of us get out of this life alive. So if our temporal bodies are going to waste away anyway, we ought to be building up that part of our lives that is eternal, and that is our spiritual being.

"But pastor, all I know is this earthly life. I don't know what comes next, so I am going to live my life to the fullest now and take my chances with the next life." Are you aware that the Bible endorses that point of view?

Ecclesiastes 8:15 So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.

Now I am *not* going to tell you that Paul endorsed this philosophy. Paul was rather intense. I don't think he was born with a party gene. But some in the fellowship at Corinth still embraced some of the rituals of their pagan past.

Do you remember the Greek word I taught you last week, *korinthiazomai*, that was coined to describe the immoral life that was commonly led by the First Century Corinthians? Paul took issue with that low standard of the Corinthian culture and encouraged his fellowship to live up to the higher standard of the life of discipleship he espoused, when he wrote

⁷we walk by faith, not by sight.

He argued that a life of faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ calls us to a higher standard, and yes, that higher standard calls us to not pursue everything in front of us that is shiny and new and attractive or fun. There is a greater goal to be pursued in the life to come that the Christians should aspire to.

My argument with this line of thinking is that it presumes living a godly life is less fun, less rewarding, less attractive than living a godless life. And here I acknowledge that I've defined two poles; godly and godless, and I don't know if it is even possible for a human being to live at either pole; we all live somewhere on that spectrum.

My position is that I enjoy my life, I enjoy pursuing the hobbies and interests I have. They are neither godly nor ungodly – they just are hobbies and interests. I enjoy the activities I do – many of them have to do with this church, but if I didn't like doing them, or I didn't like you, the membership, you'd see less of me. Fact is, I like you and I like the way I feel when I do things with you.

Do I enjoy sweeping the sidewalks of Cornersburg? Not particularly. Do I enjoy sweeping the sidewalks of Cornersburg with you? Immensely! Do I enjoy driving around delivering meals? Not particularly. Do I enjoy driving around delivering meals to members of this church that I haven't seen in a long while? Immensely!

I have chosen to live a life of faith modeled after my Lord Jesus Christ with you the members of this church doing godly things – and it feeds my spirit. I admit it. I

like the way I feel when we do something good together, and that is exactly to position Paul takes.

In Paul's First Century, life may not have been so comfortable. He wrote of himself,

⁸we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

Really? He'd rather be with the Lord now, while his life is still going on?

Let me ask you. If I told you I had a bus outside that was going to take you directly to Lord would you follow me? Or as Marshall Applewhite told his Heaven's Gate disciples, there was a spacecraft trailing the Hale-Bopp Comet that will take them the rest of the way to Heaven's Gate, would you follow him?

I'm going to predict that you will say no in both cases and that is because even knowing and trusting that what God in Christ has prepared for our eternity is far better than the great life most of us have here, we still want to see how this *known thing* turns out. I want to see how my children and grandchildren turn out.

But let me tell you, I've been at the bedside of many a person who, having lived long full lives, or perhaps suffered from a terrible illness, are ready to take their chances on whatever God in Christ has in store for them – or as Paul wrote, ⁷we walk by faith, not by sight. I suspect that something like that will happen to most of us – we will get to a place and time where we are ready – ready for whatever God in Christ has prepared for us, or "home with the Lord" as Paul wrote.

But I hope we will all agree with Paul in the conclusion of that thought,

⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.

That is the first objective of the Christian's life - to live a life pleasing to God. I agree with the great Benedictine monk, Thomas Merton, who wrote, "I believe that the desire to please [God] does in fact please [God]." There is no standard of achievement on pleasing God. We either do or we don't and as Merton said, even an attempt to please God does in fact please God.

Bill Gates has an incredible intellect. I think it could be argued that what he did with it changed the world. I think it pleases God that Bill Gates was a good steward of God's gift of intellect. Through his success, he accumulated tremendous wealth, and he used that tremendous wealth to build one of the biggest single-family dwellings in the world. I don't think that use of his wealth pleases God. However, in these last several years he and his now ex-wife formed the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation whose tag line is "We are a nonprofit fighting poverty, disease, and inequity around the world." I think that pleases God. Is it your aim to please God?

Paul wrote that,

all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

Recompense - make amends to (someone) for loss or harm suffered; compensate

Recompense is not a word we use much. It means to make amends to (someone) for loss or harm suffered; compensate. God is the giver of every gift that God gives each one of us to steward. How are you doing with the gifts God gave you? I don't ask as a threat – I think Paul comes off threatening at times – I'm just reminding you that Paul wrote that we will have our moment in front of Jesus to give an accounting of what we did with what he first gave us. How are you doing?

He took a more positive tack later in the writing when he wrote, reminding the Corinthians, that the same Christ whom we must stand in front of to give recompense, is the Christ who died for us out of his great love and obedience to God the Father.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

If the goal of heaven isn't enough;

If pleasing God isn't enough;

Will the knowledge that Christ died in your place for your sins be enough?

Enough to convince you that you don't live for yourselves, or your children, or your parents – important personal stewardship as that is. When Christ died on the cross he took away our sins, and that made us *new creations*. The social rules that order this world do apply to us because *we are a new creation*.

Everything we may think had value in this temporal life will pass away. The only thing of value that will take us to our new eternal heavenly home is faith in Jesus Christ. And that knowledge, that realization ought to change our motivation for everything we do – we ought to live for him.

Prayer

Loving and merciful God, we give you thanks for the life and ministry of the apostle Paul, whose tenacity you used to help spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ around the world. Let his example inspire us to do all we can do using the gifts you have given us, to further your kingdom, and live into the idea that we are new creations. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen