

New Creation!

I think I've mentioned before that both of my parents are buried two miles south of town in the Gnadenau cemetery. (I think I've also mentioned that every time I drive by their headstone I honk the horn twice, once for each of them.) Theirs is the middle of the only five headstones on the south side of the cemetery drive. And on their headstone are the words from the first half of 2 Corinthians 5:17: "*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.*" I don't remember them ever explaining why they wanted that verse on their headstone. But in his memoirs, Dad only says "Sometime the reader might want to look up 2 Corinthians 5:17 and try to imagine why we might have selected that verse as an epitaph for our lives."

I imagine it has to do with the fact that these words are a promise: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." I am confident that my parents both believed themselves to be "in Christ." Which is to say not just that they loved Christ, but that they knew Christ loved them. That they considered themselves part of the family of Christ—in fact, parts of the body of Christ. That they had committed themselves to be followers of Christ. (Much as Sue Buchholz committed herself and we recommitted ourselves just a few moments ago.)

But what did my parents believe about being a "new creation?" And what did Paul mean by that part of the verse? It's curious that in the original Greek, the words "is" and "there is a" are absent. A literal translation would read like this: "*So if anyone in Christ, new creation.*" It's as if no verb is needed. "If anyone . . . in Christ . . . new creation." It's as if that new creation, whatever it is, bursts forth into being (seemingly out of nowhere). And the second half of the verse includes the Greek word *idou*, meaning "behold," or "look," or "see." It definitely begs an exclamation point, which the NRSV has: "*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away: see, everything has become new!*"

This morning I want to consider with you what Paul might have meant by these two words: "new creation."

First, what if it means that anytime anyone of us commits ourselves or joins ourselves to Christ, which again we all do at our baptism, and then again anytime we recommit ourselves, we are literally re-created? Inside and out? Or as Paul says, "*the old has passed away, and everything has become new*" (exclamation point!). We receive a new brain, so that we think differently about everything. About the world, and the people in it. About the very purpose or meaning of life. We receive a new heart, so that we feel differently about the world, and people, and life in general. We receive a new set of lungs, so that we breathe differently, breathing in the Holy Spirit with each breath. We receive new eyes, so that we see differently.

The latter is precisely what Paul is talking about in this passage, already in verse 16: "*From now on, therefore, we regard [or see] no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew [or see] Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.*" Do you think we really do see each other differently, now that we have committed ourselves to Christ? Do you think we should see each other differently? Inside *and* out? Does our very appearance or demeanor change when we join ourselves with Christ? Do we now exude joy rather than disappointment? Love rather than bitterness? Grace rather than judgement? Do we know anyone like that? I can think of someone; she just joined our church this morning.

Second, it seems clear that Paul's "new creation" has something to do with how we relate to one another, and to God. It has to do with our relationships. It has to do with reconciliation. You may or may not have noticed that Paul uses that very word five times in this short passage. [*Show all five in one slide.*] In Greek, the word καταλλάσσω, here translated reconciliation, literally means to exchange one thing for another, in this case to exchange a relationship of hostility for one of friendship. And Paul is saying that now, because of Christ, there's a whole lot of reconciling going on. Look again at verse 18: "*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ . . .*" In other words, the very reason God send Christ into the world (or we might say, the very reason God himself came into world), was to reconcile himself with humanity. And now, with that taken care of, God "*has given us the ministry of reconciliation.*" He explains this further in the very next verse, verse 19: "*that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them* [in other words, he has forgiven or taken away our sins], "*and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.*"

There's something we need to keep in mind about Paul's "second" letter to the church in Corinth. At some point between his first letter and his second, his relationship with some of the Corinthians had gone severely south. He had become angry with or distrustful of some of them, and they in turn had become angry with or distrustful of him. But because of Christ's death on the cross, Paul knew that he needed to be reconciled with these people, and they with him. The entire Gospel was at stake. And so he wrote the letter (or really letters, plural) we know as Second Corinthians.

Which brings us back to Paul's "*new creation.*" It apparently is a reference not just to "*new people*" (in the sense that we all are completely transformed as individuals), but to "*new relationships,*" that is, relationships of reconciliation. In other words, we are also transformed in community.

And so, we have to ask, Where, in our relationships with others, do we need reconciliation? We all have broken (or at least strained) relationships. Within our families. Within our church. And to state the obvious, within our world. And it is now our God-given job, our mission, to work toward reconciliation, everywhere we go. I'm so grateful that Doug Bartel, in his new role as church moderator, has made this very thing his top priority: to be reconciled with the Western District, and to be reconciled with one another. Thanks be to God! And may it be so! (Exclamation point!)

Third, and finally, at least some of us have been thinking a lot about death recently. For starters, the death of DeVerne Buchholz. I so appreciate how honest the entire family has been about DeVerne's life. He had a hard life. He had a conflicted life. In his relationship with others; in his relationship with God. But now, because of Christ, DeVerne has been reconciled. "*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see [behold], everything has become new!*" [Again, exclamation point.] DeVerne is now "in Christ" in the fullest sense. Which means he is now a "new creation," in the fullest sense.

People, I promise you, we are not going to get it completely right in this lifetime. We are going to make mistakes. We are going to fall short. We are going to sin. We are going to stray. But that is precisely why, because of Christ, there is a second, brand new lifetime to come. Thanks be to God! And this, I've come to believe, is precisely why my mom and dad decided to put 2 Corinthians 5:17 on their tombstone. *So if anyone is in Christ: new creation!* I miss you and love you, mom and dad! Beep beep!

I don't know about you, but I can't wait for that new creation. I'm ready any time. But in the meantime, because of the Gospel, because of Christ, we can at least begin living within this new creation right now. What do you say? Should we? Yes, let's do it!

Amen.