

Becoming a New Creation 9-7-08
By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

2 Corinthians 5:16-20

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! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17)

Starting today and going all the way to the end of the year, we are going to take those eloquent, hope-filled words of Paul's very seriously. For the rest of this year, David and I will be preaching a rather extensive series called "Becoming a New Creation." In this series we will try to answer questions like, "What does it mean that in Christ there is a new creation? What is the old that has passed away? How has everything become new when I still live in the same place and face the same people each day and seem to have the same problems I had yesterday? And what difference does Christ make in my life and in the world?"

We live in times when the world seems so divided. There are divisions between liberals and conservatives, republicans and democrats, Christians and Muslims, black and white, men and women, pro-life and pro-choice, gay and straight, militarists and pacifists, rich

and poor, creationists and Darwinists, developed and developing world, and the list goes on. Add to that a time when we have just survived both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions and now head right smack into the political posturing that leads up to the presidential election in November. And in the midst of it all, Christianity gets played like a trump card in ways that make so many of us uncomfortable.

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There’s nothing new in the world I just described. Those kinds of divisions have been with us in one form or another since humans have come onto the scene, I’m sure. But doesn’t it sometimes seem as though it is getting worse. Commercials used try to convince us to vote for a particular candidate. Now they’re used to convince us **not** to vote for a particular candidate. This kind of cynical campaign strategy suggests to us that it’s not really about the issues and what kind of

society we want to create, but about how we feel about a leader and what **they** tell **us** to be concerned about or afraid of. This way of dividing people and trying to increase hostility between people is most certainly part of the old that must pass away if we are in Christ. As people of faith, we need to hear about and experience the new creation that comes about when we live in Christ so we don't get swept up in the "old" ways. Paul says, instead, we are to be ambassadors of Christ entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation... bringing people together, healing the divisions, making peace, caring about the world.

Unfortunately, Christianity has a bad reputation in terms of actively being about the business of healing and reconciliation. So many people have given up on Christianity because it is seen as being so judgmental and divisive and only concerned for itself. To many, Christianity is worse than irrelevant, it is part of the problem. So when Paul speaks of becoming a new creation, he is speaking to the heart of the matter today as much as in his day. The world is in

serious need of those ambassadors of Christ entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of the world. That is what salvation is all about. And Paul, here, is talking about salvation... not salvation as in where we go after we die, but salvation as in how we live, and relate to and care for God's world here and now while we are living and breathing; salvation as in how we relate to one another and to God. If we are in Christ, there is a new creation: the old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Brian McLaren - a pastor and writer, tells of the time in 1994 when he and his daughter went to Bujumbura and met with a group of Tutsi and Hutu leaders from Rwanda and Burundi. At that time, their homelands were among the most violent, poverty-stricken and dangerous countries in the world. McLaren tells of a man named Claude, the son of a preacher, who addressed the group saying, "In all of my childhood, in all the church services I attended, I only heard one sermon... The sermon went like this: "You are a sinner and you are going

to hell. You need to repent and believe in Jesus. Jesus might come back today, and if he does and you are not ready, you will burn forever in hell.” The entire room broke out in a laugh of recognition. That was the only sermon they had ever heard as well.

But then Claude got serious. He spoke of the genocide and violence and poverty and hunger in these countries going back for decades, and he said, “So much death, so much hatred and distrust between tribes, so much poverty, suffering, corruption, and injustice, and nothing ever really changed. Eventually I realized something. I had never heard a sermon that addressed these realities. Did God only care about our souls going to heaven after we died? Were our hungry bellies unimportant to God? Was God unconcerned about our crying sons and frightened daughters, our mothers hiding under beds, our fathers crouching by windows, unable to sleep because of gunfire? Or did God send Jesus to teach us how to avoid genocide by learning to love each other, how to overcome tribalism and poverty by following his

path, how to deal with injustice and corruption, how to make a better life here on earth .." (Everything Must Change, p.19) "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

Even our understanding of what it means to be a Christian can become new. When we allow Christ to enter into our minds and our hearts and our lives, we start to see things differently and the old just doesn't make sense anymore. Once we've come under the influence of the reconciling love and forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ, our vision changes and everything has become new. It can be a little disorienting, however. The world is telling you one thing, but you know in your heart something else to be true. It's like we have a jigsaw puzzle in a box, but someone put the wrong lid on the box. Can you imagine what that would be like? You look at the picture on the wrong lid, and with that wrong picture in your mind, you try to put the puzzle pieces together, only it just doesn't make sense... the colors are wrong, there are pieces

that don't match the picture in your mind... and so you keep putting more and more pieces aside and trying to fit together pieces that just won't go together. You do the best you can, but it is very frustrating. Maybe you give up and throw out the whole puzzle, or maybe you fearlessly defend that it's the right lid, you just haven't worked hard enough to fit the pieces together. Or maybe you go in search of a lid that matches the puzzle pieces in your box and discover that the pieces do fit together easily if you have the right picture on the lid.

The way we see Jesus and the world matters. So much of the picture we've been given of what it means to be Christian is like having the wrong puzzle lid. And we try the best we can to be faithful, to put the puzzle together, but it just doesn't make sense. Surely God cares that there are people all over the world dying of hunger and violence. Surely God wants a world where love is the rule and where people are not so absorbed in their own personal self-interest, but can work together to create a better world for all. Surely Jesus came to show

us the path of God's love which unites and brings down the walls that divide and which lets the last be first and the least the greatest and which heals and brings good news. Surely we are called to be partners with God in that saving work.

Salvation, as Paul shows us, is being brought back into right relationship with God. As that relationship is healed and made whole, everything is new. Thinking Jesus is just a ticket to heaven - the old has passed away. You as the center of the universe - the old has passed away. The measure of your success is your achievements, affluence and accolades - the old has passed away. Following in Jesus' steps, sent into the world to make it better for everyone - see, everything has become new! Ever deepening relationships with God, with others, and with every living thing - see, everything has become new! The measure of your life is the love you share - see, everything has become new!

We are ambassadors of Christ entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation and healing, of bringing people together, of removing barriers between people, of making peace. That is such an important and needed role in our times. God wants to work through us to make alive the grace and love poured out upon all. The old ways of division and hate and strife don't have a place in the new creation which brings hope and energy and connects us to one another in ways which bring abundant life. Once we see that, the old ways just don't make sense anymore, and we stop going along with them.

Becoming a new creation means looking at things in new ways, it means changes in the way we're used to seeing and doing things, it means being open to God's direction and vision. It can be scary at times, but it is truly the only hope for this great world God has gifted us with. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Thanks be to God! Amen.