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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Fourth Sunday in Lent
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2 Corinthians 5.16-21
Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32

New Creation!

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! —2 Corinthians 5.17

Christianity is a religion of personal transformation. Most Christians would agree to that description of our faith. Christianity is a religion of personal transformation—it is an idea so widely accepted that it is almost axiomatic for Christians. From fundamentalists, to evangelicals, to liberals, to radicals—and everyone in between—there is wide agreement on this point. Christianity is a religion of personal transformation.

There might not be much agreement, mind you, on the *nature* of that transformation. Some Christians would emphasize the transformation to a life of Bible-directed personal piety. Others would highlight the transformation to a broader kind of spirituality. Still others would lift up the ideal of transformation to an activist stance that seeks to bring justice to the world. From James Dobson to Barak Obama—the specifics differ, but the general principle is remarkably consistent across the Christian spectrum. Our faith, when it is properly preached and taught, leads to powerful transformation of the individual believer.

One of the great biblical warrants for this theological orientation has been today's epistle lesson. From his pastoral correspondence to the church at Corinth, Paul has given us a memorable verse that has been one of Christianity's most important "slogans" throughout its history. It is most memorable to me, and perhaps to many of you, from the 1940's Revised Standard Version of the Bible:

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. —2 Corinthians 5.17 (RSV)

For generations of Christians, this verse has provided an amazing message of transformation and of hope. It signals the possibility of liberation from the bondage of our past sins to new life

in Jesus Christ. No matter what we've been or done, *no matter* what we've been or done, we can find transformation in Jesus. In all of our lives, in large and small ways, the power of the past is a big personal obstacle. Past suffering we've endured, past pain we've afflicted on others, our family history, our job history, our reputation at school—you name it!—the brute force of the past can very easily grab hold of the present.

In Jesus Christ, however, “the old has passed away, behold the new has come.” Our faith offers us the key to unlock the shackles of past sin. Our faith gives us a glimpse of a future that stretches out on a radically-different trajectory. “The old has passed away...the new has come.”

The power and attraction of this idea is evident. We are all heavily invested in believing that Christianity is a religion of personal transformation. For if it is not, then we are trapped in the personal hells of our past transgressions. Despite the power and attraction of this idea, this morning I'd like to submit it to a bit of hard-headed scrutiny. Is Christianity *really* a religion of personal transformation?

My answer is, “Yes...*but*...” Christianity is a religion of personal transformation, but it is not *only* a religion of personal transformation—maybe not even *primarily* a religion of personal transformation.

To explore the issue further, I'd like to use once again the lens of 2 Corinthians 5.17. This time, however, I want us to hear the translation of the New Revised Standard Version. There is a subtle difference:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! --2 Corinthians 5.17 (NRSV)

Did you catch the distinction? I'll give you a second chance. First, the Revised Standard Version:

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.

--2 Corinthians 5.17 (RSV)

Then the New Revised Standard Version:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! --2 Corinthians 5.17
(NRSV)

Did you catch it? It is a subtle difference, but extremely important. Both translations agree on the first part, “if anyone is in Christ,” but they diverge on the second part. The older translation says, “he is a new creation.” The newer translation says, “there is a new creation.”

This is more than just fussing around with pronouns. This change in translation isn’t about making the passage more female friendly (though it has that result, too) by removing the “he.” It points to a reality of transformation that goes beyond the merely personal to the communal. The new creation envisioned here is a new creation for *all* of God’s people, not just a change of heart for *one* person. In this passage, Paul is testifying to the coming of God’s new kingdom, not just the serial redemption of individual believers.

As it turns out, scholars think this new translation is more faithful to the intent of the original Greek text. This is a wonderful example of how slight differences in translation can bring huge misunderstandings of meaning. Laboring with imperfect translations, generations of Christians have used this verse to over-personalize and over-individualize the faith of the New Testament. New Testament scholar Richard Hays offers what has become my favorite way to think about this passage. He writes:

[Previous] translations seriously distort Paul’s meaning by making it appear that he is describing only the personal transformation of the individual through conversion experience. The sentence in Greek, however, lacks both subject and verb; a very literal translation might treat the words “new creation” as an exclamatory interjection: “If anyone is in Christ—new creation!”¹

¹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), page 20.

That's the translation that is now imprinted in my brain. "If anyone is in Christ—new creation!" Instead of a pious pronouncement of personal salvation, it becomes a gleeful shout of communal hope.

The translation work of Hays and other scholars also helps to make the passage more internally consistent with its immediate context and with the broad thrust of Paul's New Testament letters. Paul cared about personal transformation, to be sure, but the majority of his time and energy was spent on *communal* transformation. He worked tirelessly to build up church communities to be a witness to God's transformation of the world.

We'll come back to Paul, but for a moment let's lift our heads up from New Testament Greek to something that I've noticed in my life here in the twenty-first century. When I talk with people about what it is like to be a pastor, I've noticed an interesting pattern that varies, depending upon who's in the conversation. Most everyone agrees that my job is one that holds considerable stress and challenge. (As well as considerable joy and satisfaction, of course!) What I've noticed, is that lay people generally assume that the struggles are in a different area than where pastors usually identify them.

If I'm talking with one of you, chances are that you think that the hardest part of my job is the demand of being present with people in times of illness, death, or personal crisis. People often assume that such constant contact with human pain would be exhausting and draining. And, sometimes it is. Most of the time, however, it is pure joy to bring God's grace to people in times of need.

If you talk with a group of pastors, however, they will generally identify different burdens as their most difficult challenges. The real stress and strain of the job comes around issues of communal leadership—the pastor's role in being a leader of a human institution with a divine mandate. Resistance to change, apathetic commitment of church members, secular ideas about organizational life—these things, not hospital calls and funerals, are the really tough parts of the job.

I think the Apostle Paul's problems parsed out in pretty much the same way. He cherished his relationships and friendships with individual Christians. But he often worried, and sometimes despaired, over the bickering and silliness of his congregations.

But he labored on. He did so because he knew that the Christian community—the church—had a vital role to play as the proclaimer and exemplar of God’s coming kingdom. For Paul and for all of us who would be faithful to the New Testament witness, the Christian faith is about more than personal salvation. We have a role, not just in our own salvation, but in the salvation of the entire world: “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.” (2 Corinthians 5.20) Each new person in the Christian fellowship is a sign of God’s far-reaching redemption. “If anyone is in Christ—new creation!”