

March 31, 2019
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
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“New Creation”

Good morning! If sermons came with warning labels this one would have a label which would say something like: Warning! This sermon may contain ideas which take effort to digest. If your stomach or other parts of you are upset, please consult your Bible. That may be a little dramatic. What I’m going to share today is kind of my personal manifesto about spiritual growth and Christian formation: these ideas have been significant to me on my own journey. These ideas may resonate with you, or not. I’ll tell you right up front the point that I want to make: if it doesn’t sound right to you, all I ask is that you listen to what I have to say so that we can have an informed conversation about it at some other time. Fair enough?

The purpose of Christian formation is not to make us good, or better, or perfect. The purpose of Christian formation is to make us whole. Do you want to hear that again? The purpose of Christian formation is not to make us good, or better, or perfect. The purpose of Christian formation is to make us whole. This is a reasonable proposition to consider, because during Lent we have been focusing on Growing in Grace [Slide] This is about Christian formation: how we are shaped and formed as followers of Jesus, and how we find salvation through the grace of Christ.

This text from 2 Corinthians is one you may have heard before -- at least verse 17, which says “If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” I give qualified agreement to the Apostle Paul here. I do not believe that in a physical, material way that everything old about us can pass away -- nor do I think that is the goal of Christian formation. I believe that the key to this section begin in verse 16, which says, “from now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human

point of view.” I want to illustrate this by using the example, as I have the past several weeks, of trees.

[Windswept] Like people, trees are shaped by the conditions and forces around them. These trees are leaning this way they are because of a force which isn't visible, but you could guess -- the wind. Trees are intended to grow upright, with sturdy support, but if these trees would be shattered by the wind before they could grow straight. These aren't "bad" trees, but they aren't formed the way that trees are intended to be.

Trees are also affected by seasonal changes. If you look outside now, most of the deciduous trees are leafless, apparently lifeless. Even the evergreens are dormant during the coldest months of the year. It's probably the amount of daylight and not temperature which causes trees to change their foliage, but somehow they know when it's time. We've all seen trees which are starting to turn golden or red when it still feels like summer outside, and if we see a tree that blossoming like crazy in October, we know that something has gone wrong.

[Bud] Many of the trees around us here in N Indiana are probably in a condition something like this: just ready to burst with potential. If you didn't know better -- if you were looking at just what you can see, you might assume the trees are dead. If you are informed by what you know about nature and seasons and cyclical growth, you may be anticipating one of the best times of the year.

[Blossom] Spring is not only about what we see, it's about what we anticipate because we know it to be true. Not every tree will live through the winter, but we know there is more to trees and their potential than what we can see merely by looking at them right now.

[Winter orchard] Here is an orchard in winter, and **[Cherry]** this is what cherry trees look like in spring. This past Wednesday our devotional reading was from Luke 13, a parable Jesus told his disciples about a fig tree. A man planted a fig tree in his vineyard, and for three years he came looking for fruit and found none, so he told the gardener to cut it down. But the gardener said, Let me care for it for one more year and see if I can make it bear fruit; if not, then you can cut it down. I like to imagine God as the owner of the

vineyard, and Jesus as the gardener. It would be pretty pointless for the owner to be angry about the location of the tree -- because he planted it there, right? It would be equally pointless to be upset because the fig tree was not producing olives. I mean, come on, it's a fig tree -- you are never going to get olives from that tree. So what's wrong with this fig tree? What does this tree need to do differently? It actually needs to start producing some figs. That's what fig trees are intended to do; that's what the gardener is asking for: let me help this tree do what it was intended to do.

The human point of view which I believe Paul is referencing in 2 Corinthians 5 is the view which is limited to the physical, material things which we can see and touch and experience right now. From this point of view, Jesus was nothing much: born to a parents too poor to afford much, grew up in ordinary circumstances, was an intenerate preacher without a home or property, and was executed as a criminal for political insurrection. That's the story. But Jesus was a person with more potential than anyone before or since: he was all of those human things I just mentioned, and he was God's Son and one with God. He is the only person who has ever lived completely as the Creator intended: Jesus was whole: wholly human and wholly divine. When we know Christ from *that* point of view -- even if we don't know it completely the way the God knows it -- that changes everything about Jesus: it makes everything new.

I believe that God created each of us to be whom God intends us to be. If God made me a fig tree, God is not going to condemn me for not being a sugar maple. The goal of Christian formation is not to be well-behaved, or friendly, or to conform to everyone else's expectations; it is not to become someone else--someone who is just a little bit better than our current selves. Formation is a more radical transformation than that: It is to become the person God created us to be; the new creature who no longer sees and is seen from a human point of view. A lovely fruit tree without any fruit is not fulfilling its purpose. That's why we need the gardener. That's why we need grace. Only one person has fully understood the mind of God, and that is Jesus. God knows, the rest of us have sinned and fallen short: we haven't fully become who God created us to be -- we don't understand, we don't care, it's too much work, we don't have any support, nobody has ever told us the good news that we have been

created to be more than what we can see right now. Jesus came to show us how to live and grow and become the people God created us to be: how to treat other people -- not because we're nice, but because we love them, because Jesus loves us. More than that, we love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength -- with everything we've got. People lived for thousands of years before Jesus came to earth: some of them were pretty good, some not so good, some of them were friends with God and God used some of them to accomplish great things. None of them were whole. None of them were reconciled to God in Christ.

Paul tells us that in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. We have been entrusted with that message of reconciliation to share with others. Because of the grace of Christ, we can grow into the people God intended for us to be. I don't believe that any of us will be entirely whole in this life: the final work of grace is our welcome into eternal life. But along the way, the gardener is working with us and encouraging us: one more season, one more year, one more chance to bear fruit. Stand strong, brothers and sisters. God has created us, Christ has redeemed us, and Christ's grace can make us whole. In Jesus' name, Amen.