

Seeing Humanity as a New Creation

Psalm 32

Joshua 5:9-12

Luke 15:1-2, 11b-32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 (from Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

5:16 From 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.

5:17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

5:18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;

5:19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

5:20 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.

5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Well, we are over the hump, folks! Lent is more than half over. It almost feels as though this is the highlight, the heart, of the Lenten experience. The Gospel for today is the text that our Lenten devotional materials have been focusing on and slowly I'm looking more towards Easter than focusing on Lent.

This whole religious experience is focusing on renewal. Just as in winter it seems as though the trees and plants die, it seems as though parts of our optimism and joy are, shall I say, "a bit subdued" during the winter months. But Lent is here, helping us truly to ease into Spring, to appreciate the good things that come from regular down time and gearing us, guiding us gently to longer days, rosebuds, tree blossoms and - to hope - to light - to joy.

There is hope in each new Spring, and I believe God wants to remind us of that fact - that there is always hope, but we see it during this time. Let us, for a moment, look at the Old Testament scripture from today. "The Lord said to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.'" Can you imagine that? A people who have had the mentality of being 'owned' by others - being less human, of less worth, less free - than those of the society which their owners came from. And suddenly, that stamp upon their sense of self is "rolled away".

Now, we don't know if this actually changed anyone's internal vision of themselves. Often we carry around self images that we aren't even aware of - but the fact is - Joshua knew. The words were spoken - God said - you no longer have to be fed by others - you can take charge of your own lives! You can start anew! And it happened. The Israelites were no longer "escaped Egyptian slaves", they were free; eating off the crops of the Land where they lived. They became a new creation.

It is truly hard to change your view of who you are, even if those self images are truly destructive. But God tells us, through the words that we have received from spiritual leaders for thousands of years, that change is possible at any time.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, which I read earlier, this view seems to be taken to an extreme! No one is even regarded as human! All Christians are new creations! EVERYTHING old has passed away - EVERYTHING has become new.

Now, Paul was writing this in response to something that had been conveyed to him, so we don't really know what he is referring to, but the purpose was clear - he wanted every person who had discovered and experienced the truth about Jesus to accept their new image - no longer slaves to whoever they were before - but they are new people! If they felt any guilt from their actions before - they needed to know they are forgiven and can start in this second with a brand new life.

Now this new life wasn't necessarily going to free them from responsibilities of the previous life - if there was some reconciliation needed, they needed to do it. But the truth is - by claiming Jesus as their source of wisdom and power,

they had at their access the ability to be reconciling! Just as the Israelites had to get used to the idea of no longer being slaves, these Corinthians had to get used to being Christians.

Paul points out that God was trying to reach humanity by sending Christ. God wasn't trying to punish humanity for straying so far away from him, God was reaching out to humanity through Jesus. And Jesus suffered on this earth. Jesus was ignored, abused, tortured and murdered! And that continued connection with humanity is what God was sharing. God is saying, I know your pain, I understand why you sin – but you are always, always, free to return to me – you are always free to start new!

This is where the image of the loving father from the Prodigal Son parable comes in. This parable has been called the most perfect, the most beloved parable of all time, because it is so right to the point. Even little children see the significance! We all are like the younger son, struggling to be free - to experience life on our own terms – and yet we also can find ourselves resenting those who made what we see as reckless mistakes, and feeling a bit cocky and judgmental about it, wanting to be placed above others because we showed we are better than they!

And I believe we all can also relate to the father. I am sure that there have been numerous times, after an argument with someone we truly loved, when they came to us and wanted to fix whatever was wrong – when they showed they loved us, that we were thrilled to pieces! So happy and relieved! We have all been there.

And that reconciliation after a fight – didn't it feel like a new beginning? Something had died during the argument – a trust? And when the reconciliation came about – there is a new beginning – a wiser one, perhaps a bit more cautious, but a new beginning.

On this Sunday we are called to believe that humanity can be a new creation. It is very hard to believe in this at times – but that is the promise of the word of God! That is our calling as Prodigal Fathers and Mothers . . . not to give up on humanity! Because when we give up on “them” – we give up on ourselves.

Something struck me last Wednesday as Sarah was talking about the gospel text. I believe it was Frank who said something about the loss of a part of one's self when the offspring leave the nest. That got me to thinking about my feelings as a mother.

When I was pregnant, everything I ate, every move I made, when I slept, what I said, felt, did – all seemed to be done keeping in mind that there was this being inside of me experiencing it all, as well. (I think that is when I started laying down the law about cuss words in my vicinity.) Through books and doctor visits, I knew as much as I could about what was going on with this being inside of me.

When he was born – we had to turn him, because he couldn't turn himself – I had to feed him – and when he woke up we studied every facial expression. One of us was always with him, and we very rarely left him with someone else. When he began to be able to turn himself, feed himself, walk and run and think for himself, I mourned the loss of the beautiful baby that was, but was filled with pride that he was growing as he should.

When he was 4 and we put him into pre-school, it was strange, because he was experiencing things, which I *could not* know about. *Some* things I heard about – but I had to learn to accept the fact that this being that was part of me, was separate from me. He was becoming more and more independent with each new phase of his life. And I had to let go and trust. And rejoice each day that he came home and shared with me what little bits he could of his life.

That is God's experience, I think. God creates us and we are a part of God. God wants us to grow and discover our full potential! God wants us to become more and more like Christ. But what often happens? We run away and take our inheritance and forget all about our source, our true selves.

When those times come that we realize whose we are, and we return home to God, God can do nothing else but be thrilled – because that which was once a part of God – and left God – has returned. We are all just parts of God running in various directions, but we come back and share our lives with God, and there is cause for great rejoicing.

And each time we make this cycle of growing closer to God, we are creating a new being in us. We become part of God and part of each other. We are less self absorbed and thinking only of our own worth – and become someone who can empathize with the loses of others. When we see ourselves as new creations, we recognize the sameness in

others. We can see all of humanity as new creations – parts of God circling around returning and touching the holy and slipping out, returning and slipping and all in need of forgiveness.

My closing words I will make as clear as I can. During this reflective time of Lent, we may see things in ourselves and in others that may cause us pain. We may feel hopeless about aspects of ourselves, or about those we care for, we may even be feeling hopeless about the world! But our faith has over thousands of years been saying to us – Believe in God – believe in humanity’s ability to become a new creation. Believe in Christ’s reconciling power! It is the truth!

Our silly minds may try to tell us otherwise – like there is no hope to get healthy again, or to sing and dance or be happy – or to love – whatever painful thought you have that *keeps us* from killing the fatted calf and celebrating – that thought is wrong, and God is calling us to come home. Home to hope.