

A WORD FROM THE ASSURANCE OF PARDON

II Corinthians 5:14-17

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, June 14, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

FOCUS TEXT

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. 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. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

As you may have noticed, our worship nearly always begins with the same pattern. We move from praising God through music, to acknowledging our sinfulness and shortcoming through the Prayer of Confession, to receiving assurance of pardon, and then to glorifying God through the *Gloria Patri*.

- Praise
- Confession
- Assurance
- And glory

Every Sunday. 52 Sundays a year. Twice a Sunday during the school year.

I am told that some churches, seeking to be contemporary, omit from their liturgies a Prayer of Confession. They do so, I understand, because they want their worship services be upbeat, happy, positive from start to finish. “Nothing about sin or sadness,” they say. “Nothing negative.”

We do not make such an omission. Because we believe God is Lord of all of life – Lord during our times of joy and our times of sadness, Lord during our times of righteousness and our times of sin – we include a Prayer of Confession. But as soon as the Prayer of Confession is over, we hear the Assurance of Pardon:

... Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.
He himself bore our sins
In his body on the cross,
That we might be dead to sin,
And alive to all that is good...¹

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love....
God does not deal with us according to our sins,
Nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
So great is God’s steadfast love
Toward those who stand in awe of him...²

And from today’s Assurance:

...Anyone who is in Christ
Is a new creation.
The old life has gone;
A new life has begun.
Know that you are forgiven
And be at peace.³

¹ Romans 6:11-13.

² Exodus 34:6-7.

The Prayer of Confession is not the final word; that distinction belongs to the Assurance of Pardon.

I.

The words of assurance in today's scripture reading are more than words penned by a Biblical writer sitting on an isolated hilltop away from the rough and tumble of the world. In fact, the Apostle Paul wrote them in what was probably his third or fourth letter to a congregation he had founded at Corinth. Corinth itself was a new, ethnically and religiously diverse seaport city. The church at Corinth reflected the divisions and tension within the city itself.

- There were serious disagreements about sexual morality, as some members reflected the libertine mores of sea life; other members came from religious backgrounds, some of which glorified the body and all that could be done with it and some of which denied the body and its legitimacy.⁴
- Some in the church felt that Paul's leadership was lacking in ardor and charisma; they followed more eloquent and attractive leaders.⁵
- Some spoke in tongues, and claimed spiritual superiority to those who had not received such gift.⁶
- Wealthier members of the church tended not to want to sit by the poorer members, even at the Lord's Supper.⁷
- There appears to have been a painful incident in the life of the congregation involving one man, who may have publicly insulted Paul.⁸
- It appears the congregation had disciplined the man, and Paul had written: "This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; so now...forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him."⁹

Into this situation – of charge and countercharge, sin and forgiveness, relationships frayed and repaired, Paul writes:

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

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

The bottom line is that Paul writes out of human struggles like ours: They involve real differences over such high minded things as the nature of God, the nature of life, and the nature of community, as well as such small minded matters as jealousy, name calling, and turf wars. Paul's words of forgiveness emerge from and speak to the rough and tumble of human life.

II.

Let's look more deeply at two aspects of his words.

(a)

"From now on," he begins. "From now on."

Some scholars assert that Paul is here talking about his conversion experience, the time when, on the road to Damascus, he encountered a blinding light and heard a voice from heaven which led him to turn from rounding up Christians to becoming an apostle for Christ.¹⁰

But others assert when Paul writes "from now on," he is referring to is something larger than his own religious experience.¹¹

³ II Corinthians 5:17.

⁴ I Corinthians 5:1-13.

⁵ I Corinthians 1:10-17.

⁶ I Corinthians 12 and 14.

⁷ I Corinthians 11:17-26.

⁸ II Corinthians 10-13.

⁹ II Corinthians 2:5-8/

¹⁰ Acts 9.

¹¹ For the range of these views, see J. Louis Martyn, "Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages," in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 89-110.

You see, what has preceded Paul's "from now on" is something cosmic in origin:

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died.

Paul is focused on something larger than his own soul. He is talking about that has originated in heaven – "the love of Christ" – but takes shape and form on earth – "one died for all; therefore all have died."

Paul is saying that in the grand sweep of God's relationship with the earth and its people – from creation to fall to promise to redemption – God has brought a new age, a new way of being, a new reality to the universe, giving his life in love for *all* so that *all* may be changed, "so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."

"From now on" is not about Paul; it is about what has happened to all of us in Jesus Christ. It is cosmic in origin, earthly in impact. One does not have to have had a dramatic religious conversion to receive its benefits. "One has died for all," Paul says. "For all."

(b)

Paul then goes on to describe the nature of this cosmic change as it relates to something quite close to home: earthly forgiveness.

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

I want you to notice the words here and follow me closely:

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First, he says, "there is a new creation." Something entirely new has come into being.

And of what does this "new creation" consist?

"Everything old has passed away," he says, yet, this same "everything" has become "new."

Do you sense a contradiction here?

"Everything has passed away." Okay, I understand that.

But "everything has become new"? How can something both "pass away" and "become new" at the same time?

The other day I was at a church member's home and noticed, next door, an enormous house under construction.

All other houses in the neighborhood appeared to be 50 to 75 years old, yet in the midst of these stately, older homes, a new home was rising out of the ground.

I said, "What happened? Was there a fire? Did someone buy an old house and tear it down to build a new one?"

"Yeah," the host said. But then he said. "Well, no."

"Under all that construction," he continued, "there is a little house, a tiny house by comparison, an original house that is being subsumed into this new house."

Did the old house "pass away," or is the old house "becoming new"?

It's a little of both.

What it leads me to say is this:

When we have been forgiven, or when we have been hurt and extend forgiveness, the event – the thing – of which we are forgiving or have been forgiven doesn't go away completely.

- Wrongs may be forgiven, but they cannot be undone.
- Hurts may heal, but surgery scars remain, however faint upon the skin.
- Betrayals and misdeeds can be pardoned, but forgiveness doesn't undo the fact that they occurred.

But like the old house, these are subsumed into the new house that becomes a "new creation." This "new creation" is made possible by the *cosmic* love of God demonstrated in the *earthly* life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These "old things" have "passed away" in that they have been subsumed into the "new creation" brought by Christ.

*...everything old has passed away;
see, everything has become new!*

IV.

So the Associate Pastor was preaching to her congregation. It was one of those hot summer days. The Senior Pastor was on vacation. Crowd was pretty thin that day. As she preached, she sensed people were not taking her seriously.

“I was talking about forgiveness,” she said. “And I had the feeling that those who were still awake were saying to themselves: ‘What does she know about forgiveness? She’s so young, and she lives behind that robe.’”

Something – to this day she can only attribute it to the Spirit – prompted her to stop her sermon and say: “You all don’t think I know what I’m talking about, do you?”

Wives elbowed their husbands to wake up. Heads popped into to alertness.

She then told them that as a young girl her father had done things to her that no father should ever do.

She told them that in her twenties, when her sister had shared with her similar experiences, they decided to confront their father.

When they did, to their surprise, he admitted what he had done and he asked their forgiveness.

The whole thing set off a family firestorm.

Some siblings sided with the two sisters, some criticized them, the mother felt caught in the middle.

That was ten years ago, she said. The road to forgiveness has been bumpy, to say the least. Not everyone has travelled it at the same speed, sometimes not even in the same carriage. But we are still a family. No, she said, we are a new family.

In her story, courageously but instantaneously told, the past has been subsumed in the present, like an old house subsumed into something entirely new.

*So if anyone is in Christ,
there is a new creation:
everything old has passed away;
[yet] everything
[including the old]
has become new!*

When she stood at the door after the service, people stood in line to tell her their stories.