

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, FL
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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2 Corinthians 5:14-17 (NRSV)

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. [15] 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.

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

PREPARED BY IMAGINATION

There's an old saying that scientists are fond of using, "Chance favors the prepared mind." The prepared mind is a mind filled with imagination and wonder.

In order to discover new things, the scientist must have the ability and the willingness to look at the world in a new way. If the scientist cannot do that, he or she might be witnessing a very significant event in the laboratory or in nature and yet not be able to see it. The mind can be easily clouded by prior assumptions.

Some people think that the creative work of a science fiction writer like Jules Verne for instance prepared the way for real scientific discoveries in the next century. Believe it or not many of the things that Verne imagined in his novels proved to be true.

But, more importantly, the writings of Verne and the work of other visionaries like him enabled us to look at the future in a new way. We were willing to attempt space travel and other "outrageous" things because someone first imagined that we could do it.

Albert Einstein once said, "We see what our theories permit us to see."

In other words, we have certain expectations about what we might see and these expectations (or theories) guide us in the discovery process. We are

enabled to see because we have a system that helps us make sense of the world. Vision precedes discovery.

But sometimes revolutionary thinkers like Einstein come up with a new theory and that really changes things. What we thought we knew turns out to be all wrong. We discover that we were blinded about reality by our assumptions.

It's a whole new universe out there because Einstein gave us a different vision.

IMAGINATION AND FAITH

Imagination plays an important role in religion as well as science. According to our lesson for today, it's a whole new universe because Jesus has given us a new way of seeing. Our old way of looking at things (life in the flesh or life from a human point of view as Paul put it) is just not true. What we need is a new theory of religion. We need a new vision.

Walter Bruggeman wrote a book entitled, "The Prophetic Imagination." And his thesis was that the prophets were able to institute social change in the ancient world by presenting a different vision of life. It was God's vision. It was vision that challenged the popular mindset, and especially the beliefs of the corrupt rulers of the day.

And that changed everything.

The ancient kings of Israel would come and go, but the word of God as revealed by the prophets remains. And it still plays an important role in shaping the world.

A VISION PROBLEM

According to the Bible, all of us have a vision problem. We need to look at things not with our physical eyes but with the eyes of faith. The apostle Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians that "we walk by faith, not by sight." (2 Corinthians 5:7)

In other words we look at the world in a different way from the ordinary person because we too have a different set of assumptions. Our theory of life is not defined by Wall Street or Main Street. Our theory of life is not determined by politics or family custom.

Our theory of life is determined by the word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It's a whole new world when you walk with Jesus.

But, trouble is, we're happy with the old world.

Today's lesson was a letter written to the church at Corinth. Corinth was the place to be in the ancient world. If you could make it there you could make it anywhere.

Corinth was the apex of culture and commerce. Her strategic location made the city a bustling center of trade. In Corinth the best of the great Greek and Roman cultures came together.

It was also the capital of the sporting world as well. Corinth was the site of an Olympic style event that was like the Super Bowl of the ancient world.

Paul talked about his brave new world, but I suspect many of the Corinthians liked their own world just fine. Indeed, I'm sure many would have preferred to shape religion to fit their needs instead of the other way around. In fact some of the old heresies that Paul spoke against in his letters to the Corinthians attempted to do just that. They tried to put a Christian veneer on what they already believed.

A HUMAN POINT OF VIEW

We've talked the past few weeks about how many people come to Jesus with preconceived notions about him. They had their own theories about who he was and what he was calling them to do. And because of that they are unable to really see him.

Paul said that at one time he was one of those people. He also regarded Jesus from a human point of view. (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:16) And Paul's initial human evaluation of Jesus was not very positive.

In fact Paul actually persecuted the disciples of Christ. From Paul's viewpoint as an orthodox Jew, the disciples of Christ represented a great threat to true religion.

But, on the road to Damascus Paul had his vision corrected. He was brought to his knees by a vision of the Risen Christ, and his old sight was taken away. Eventually he was able to see again, but now his way of looking at the world had changed 180 degrees.

The disciples of Christ found it hard to believe that their former persecutor was now an enthusiastic preacher, but it was true. One of the most exciting things about the Christian faith is the possibility that enemies can be turned into friends. Unbelievers can be turned into believers. Death can be turned into life eternal.

A NEW CREATION

According to the Christian theory of life, the final frontier is not space but the human heart. If a person's heart is changed by the power of the Spirit, everything changes. It's like a whole new creation.

It seems impossible, but the leopard can change his spots. By the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ the impossible happens every day. Sins are forgiven. Lives are changed. It's a whole new world.

Jurgen Moltmann, a German theologian wrote, "We have attempted to view the resurrection from the viewpoint of history. Perhaps the time has come for us to view history from the viewpoint of the resurrection."

That's what we are called to do as followers of Jesus Christ. We are called to view history from the viewpoint of the resurrection. We are called to paint a different picture of life based upon a hope that cannot be defeated.

Life is not (as a philosopher once put it) "short, nasty and brutish". In Christ Jesus we have hope for life eternal.

We are not cogs in the great industrial machine. We are God's children.

It is that vision which enables human beings to survive and even thrive in even the most difficult of circumstances.

KEEP HOPE ALIVE

Victor Frankl in his book *From Death Camp to Existentialism* wanted to know why some of those living in the death camps died before reaching the ovens while others managed to survive despite the brutal conditions. He said that the survivors had a “will to meaning.”

No matter how hard things got they never gave up hope. They would not accept the judgment of their captors. They believed that the God who delivered his people from enslavement in Egypt would somehow deliver them as well.

In short, it was their faith that kept them alive.

Howard Thurman, former dean of the chapel at Boston University and the grandson of a slave told how the Christian faith gave his ancestors hope during the trial of slavery.

The owner of the plantation apparently thought that it would do no harm if the preacher went down and told the slaves about Jesus on Sunday afternoon. The slave owner was wrong. As one African Methodist Episcopal preacher put it, “If you want people to stay where they are put, don’t tell them about Jesus.”

But, they told these oppressed people about Jesus, and it made a difference. Thurman’s grandmother recalled, “He hardly ever preached a sermon without going by Calvary.” The slave congregation could always relate well to a man who was treated like dirt, beaten down and left for dead.

But, the old preacher did more than talk about Calvary when he talked to the slaves. Thurman’s grandmother said, “When he went by Calvary, he was always moved to shout, ‘But, God raised him again! And he is seated at the right hand of God in heaven!’”

Then the preacher would take off his glasses, and look straight into the eyes of the congregation, and lean over the pulpit, and say to them in words that were as plain as day, “Slaves, you are not any man’s property. You are children of God Almighty! Never forget it!”

Thurman’s grandmother told him that whenever the preacher would come to that part of the story her spine would stiffen, and she was ready to live another day.

That’s the power of the gospel. That’s the power of a story which (as Paul put it) does not look at things from a “human point of view.”

PAINTING A PICTURE OF HOPE

Sometimes we preachers try to turn the Bible into one big rule book. But, oddly enough, the Bible is not so much about rules and regulations; the Bible is about painting a picture of a “new heaven and a new earth.” The Bible is about teaching us to look at things in a different way, a heavenly way instead of a human way.

Quite often I speak with people who think that they have come to the end of their rope. They say things like, “I had no other option. It was all I could do given the situation. I’m trapped.” In a difficult time their vision had become very restricted. They can see all of the problems but none of the possibilities.

Certainly all of us have real problems, but all of us do not look at those problems in the same way. Some people live in constant turmoil. The slightest provocation can knock them off the beam.

But, others are able to withstand tremendous stress and even flourish in times of difficulty. The stress of trouble becomes a refiner’s fire instead of a melting pot. Like tempered steel they come out of difficulty stronger than ever. What’s the difference?

I think the difference is often due to spiritual depth. Spiritual people, people that understand what it means to be in Christ and trust in his grace have a

whole different take on things. They can be gracious and loving even with ungracious and unloving people.

You see, their lives are not controlled by circumstances. Their lives are controlled by the heavenly vision. The world has not changed. They simply look at the world in a different way.

The most powerful force in the world is the power to change a person's perception. Patty Labelle used to sing about "a new attitude." That's what we need, a new attitude.

But, new attitudes are hard to come by on our own. In fact, some would say that we need divine intervention.

Fortunately such help is available. The one who created the leopard's spots can change them. We can be changed. We can be recreated by the power of God's salvation in Christ Jesus.

RUTH

Kenneth Bakkan, a Christian physician told of a woman named Ruth who came to his office. He said that this woman in her early 50s spoke "in a soft, rushed monotone, with an urgency and desperation in her voice." He said that she "flooded the room in a torrent of words and tears, as if she needed to tell her story without interruption in fear of not being able to finish."

Ruth had lived with a disastrous marriage for 25 years. Her husband was a binge drinker who was extremely cruel and abusive. He had managed to hold a well paid managerial position with a company for many years, but eventually he was fired because of his chronic alcohol problem and related patterns of behavior.

One evening while Ruth and her husband were lying in bed, the television malfunctioned and caught fire. The bedroom filled with smoke, and the drapes began to burn. Ruth's husband attempted to put out the fire with his bathrobe and was burned on more than 80 percent of his body. He died a painful death three days later.

The physician said that “Ruth wept bitterly as she related the vivid details of holding her husband’s lifeless hand and trying to comfort him during those last horrible days. She hated him, and yet she tried to love him in his dying. She was bitter and angry, and yet she desperately sought forgiveness and reconciliation.”

The husband’s death did not bring an end to Ruth’s pain. Her adult daughter refused to attend her father’s funeral. It seems that she hated her father and blamed her mother for his drinking and for his death.

With no support from family or friends, things got worse. Several days after her husband’s death, Ruth began experiencing a recurring nightmare. She would dream of the badly burned body. Clinging to it she was immobilized in fear and dread. She would awaken in the middle of the night screaming and drenched in sweat.

This dream occurred every night for three years. Since she could not go to sleep after the dream she was always exhausted and agitated. Her life was a nightmare. She had consulted numerous counselors and physicians and had tried every kind of medication without relief. She said that if something did not change soon she was either going to lose her mind or take her own life.

Dr. Bakkan used a spiritual approach to treating Ruth’s problem. He quoted Scripture and told Ruth that “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” (2 Peter 3:8) He went on to say that they could ask Jesus to walk back in time with them.

He said, “We can ask him in prayer to be present at the time of your husband’s death and to heal the painful memory. The memory will remain, but the pain associated with that memory will be eliminated. You will be able to live again.”

Ruth was willing to try anything at this point. They prayed together that day for healing, and she was healed. In that one moment by the power of God’s Spirit she was able to forgive herself, her husband and her daughter.

Her experience with a compassionate, healing God enabled her to stand against the elements that sought to destroy her. She was able to rebuild her life and family.

DO YOU WANT TO BE HEALED?

I know that sounds too easy, especially for those of you who are struggling with your own demons today. It's not easy. But it is possible.

Theologian Richard Foster wrote,

“To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer ... [But] the closer we come to God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conformed to Christ.”

I'm reminded of the question Jesus asked the paralytic man who waited by the pool long ago. Jesus asked, “Do you want to be healed?” (John 5:6) What a question to ask a man who had struggled thirty eight years with illness! And yet Jesus asked that question, not only of this man but of many others as well.

Apparently many of us love to nurse our wounds instead of asking for real help.

And so that is the question each of us must answer for ourselves. Do we want to be healed? Do we want to be in Christ where the world is turned upside down? Do we want to be a part of the new creation or do we think that the old creation is just fine?

Often our lips say yes, but our actions belie a different answer.

You may have noticed that I often use a paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 5:17 as a declaration of pardon. “If anyone is in Christ he or she is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold the new has come.” I use that phrase often because I think that it is at the heart of my ministry, letting the old pass away and embracing the new.

That requires all of us to exercise faith and forgiveness.

That requires all of us to let the old nightmare pass so that we can, perhaps for the first time, really embrace the holy.

And when we embrace the holy, there is the opportunity to be truly whole.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN