

## Christ's Creations

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Richmond Heights, Ohio

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Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-10

Text: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. . . ." -- 2 Corinthians 5:17

I'd like to show you a little of what I did on my summer vacation this past August. These are slides from my trip to Miami County, Ohio, to do some genealogical field research. I had a twofold mission this trip: I wanted to know where my family's farm had been, and I wanted to find the graves of my first Ohio ancestors, Daniel and Catharine Brown McAfee, who came to Ohio between 1832 and 1835. I'm a sixth-generation Ohioan thanks to Daniel and Catharine, who were my great-great-great grandparents, and they came from Maryland. I'm happy to say that I accomplished both goals. Here's what I found. [slides]

We all have a certain amount of curiosity, I think, about where we come from. I certainly do, having been orphaned at an early age and not having the opportunity learn very much about my family from my parents. And we weren't the sort of family that kept a lot of written records, so there weren't old Bibles and trunks of letters and safety deposit boxes for me to go through and find out where I came from. So I've had to dig up most of what I know about my family from archives and public records, which has been both challenging and fun.

Our Epistle lesson this morning, from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, is also about where we came from. Specifically, it's about where Christians come from.

Christians, as you all know, are not born; we're made. Even in those traditions where people are baptized as infants, there is no suggestion that a baby born to Christian parents is therefore also a Christian. No branch of the Christian church that I know of believes that. Unlike our Jewish sisters and brothers, we don't believe that Christianity is or can be inherited. Christianity is not cultural, and it doesn't come with the genes our parents give us; it comes instead as a gift of the Holy Spirit. It's the thing that makes all things new. We become, as Paul tells the Corinthians, "new creations" in Christ. We become Christ's creations.

Now I realize of course that this talk about becoming new creations and so forth may sound dangerously evangelical to some of you. It sounds a lot like being born again, that phrase found so infrequently in the Bible, yet which has caused so much division in the Christian family and so much distrust of Christians in our culture over the past half-century.

You all know what I mean. Being "born again" makes many of us cringe when we hear it because it became a sort of battle cry for a kind of Christianity that frankly embarrasses many of us. It's a kind of Christianity that's socially and theologically narrow, aggressive, fundamentalist, and exclusivist, and we're not going anywhere near that type of Christianity. I was raised in it and I left it for a variety of reasons, and if that type of Christianity was the only type of Christianity in the world, then I'd probably not be a Christian, and I know many people feel the same way.

Remember what Gandhi said? Gandhi said he would've been a Christian if it

hadn't been for Christians, because, "Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." What a terrible thing for a great moral leader to say about us. What a damning indictment of the way we Christians have represented Jesus Christ in the world. We are, whether we like it or not, as Paul says, "ambassadors for Christ," but we have been such shameful ambassadors of Christ that many people have rejected Christianity not because of Christ or because of Satan or because of their own hard-heartedness, but because of us.

So I understand the distrust many of you have of us Christians who use traditional language like being born again. I know that some of you wonder when I'm going to come out of the closet as a fundamentalist because I call myself an evangelical Christian. I can assure you, you're going to be waiting for that emergence for a long, long time, because I'm not a fundamentalist Christian and I'm also not a crypto-Catholic, despite my respect for good liturgical worship. I'm a thoroughly Protestant Christian, happily at home in the United Church of Christ, who believes with utter conviction that being a new creation in Christ is absolutely indispensable for your salvation. There is no salvation without a new you; that, in fact, is exactly what salvation is: it's the new you. You are saved when you become the new you in Jesus Christ that God has promised you can become.

And the amazing thing is, I believe it's happening. I believe people in this church are becoming those new creations in Christ that Paul spoke of. I believe this church is becoming a new creation in Christ. I see things happening in this church I haven't seen before – wonderful things, beautiful things, hopeful things, encouraging things – and I believe they're all the gift of the Holy Spirit.

I saw it last Tuesday night at MLC's regular meeting. As much as I hate meetings, not only was I glad I was there, I wish all of you could've been there, too. It was magnificent! The leadership of this church, time and time again, rose to the challenges that were set before us as the business of this church, and they did so with all those gifts of the Holy Spirit promised to us in Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It was magnificent! They were magnificent! Your elected leaders, time and again, cut through the non-essentials, refused to bog themselves down in irrelevancies, and kept the mission of this church first and foremost in their hearts and minds and words, and I've never been prouder to be the pastor of this amazing congregation.

And it's not just MLC. I see it everywhere. On the young end of the age spectrum, I see it in the youth group responding to Daria's classes in spiritual practices, and at the adult end of the age spectrum, I see it in the class on contemplative living that Pat's been leading. When I mentioned this in a conference call with UCC pastors from all over Ohio last week, you could hear the surprise: this is happening in a UCC church?

I see it in Ron Ober's work in El Salvador – work for justice and peace and fair trade, using the vast resources of this country to try to improve the lives of working people there and transform the hearts and minds of the rich and powerful here. If that's not missionary work, I don't know what is.

I see it in Alyssa Nedrow's being dropped off alongside a highway in northeast Ohio on a Sunday morning in February so she can be picked up by her grandmother so she won't miss church. And she didn't have anything that required her presence here that Sunday, she just didn't want to miss church. A teenager who doesn't want to miss church? Can I have an Amen for that one?

It's everywhere. I see it in Kathy Lorentz's raising of seedlings to give to anyone who'll plant them and share the produce with the Cleveland Food Bank. I see it in the trips to the doctor that people in this congregation provide, week after week, month after month. I see it in the monthly service we hold for our neighbors at Homewood, begun by a simple request from Mary Lowry, who never missed a service when she was in town.

I could go on and on. This church is becoming a new creation in Christ. The past is finished and gone; everything has become fresh and new. It's taken us six and a half years to get to this point, to see these green shoots and buds of spiritual growth, but since we're working with the Holy Spirit, we're neither early nor late but we're right on time.

Don't be afraid, my dear friends, of falling into the hands of the living God. Jonathan Edwards tried to scare people with that image two hundred years ago in Massachusetts, but I'm not trying to frighten you; you're plenty frightened enough. I'm trying to encourage you, embolden you, strengthen you, goad you into taking the decisive step that will make your life new.

Don't be afraid to let the Holy Spirit shape you, mold you, make you, and re-make you. Don't be afraid to give up your long-standing habit of regarding everything from a human point of view. Have the guts – the guts to call yourself born again or evangelical or a believer or a Christian or a follower or a disciple or whatever term you want to use -- and take on the new life that comes from regarding everything from God's point of view, as Christ our savior did.

Imagine how different your life might be if you gave up looking at things as Dave or Linda or Art or Phyllis and started looking at things – everything – as God looks at them. Imagine how different the world must be to the one who made it all, knows it all, and loves it all!

Imagine how different that difficult co-worker or that tyrannical boss or that disappointing child or that demanding spouse or that annoying church member might look if you didn't relate to them as a colleague or subordinate or parent or spouse or church-goer, but related to them instead as God relates to them – infinitely loving, infinitely understanding, infinitely patient, infinitely forgiving. They may not change, but you certainly will, and that's the only change that matters as far as you're concerned. It is not your job to pray that your difficult boss or spouse or child or co-worker will become a new creation in Christ; it is your job to pray that you will! And when you start to become that new creation, it no longer matters what's going on with them; their power over you, whatever it may have been, is broken. You no longer live to meet their expectations. You no longer live to try to please them. You no longer live feeling responsible for their decisions. You no longer fear their ability to retaliate or punish or break your heart. Everything – everything – has become fresh and new.

That's what it means to be a new creation in Christ. You are different. You are not, appearances notwithstanding, what you were before. You made a conscious decision to let God, through the Holy Spirit, turn you into someone you've never been before. You can't do that, but God can, and the only thing preventing God from working that miracle is you.

And don't be afraid that your family and friends won't recognize you – they will! Trust me, they will, and not only will they recognize you, the people who love you now will love you even more, because you become more lovable, not less, when you “let others see Jesus in you” as we used to sing in the Baptist church.

When you let Jesus Christ shine through your life, you don't have to sign up for membership in any political party. You don't have to subscribe to any particular set of social or political or theological opinions. You don't have to march with this group or against that one. You don't have to sing this particular type of music or read that particular translation of the Bible.

The only thing you have to do is love – you have to love the whole world, everything, everyone, all the time, no exceptions. You work and struggle for change to make the place more just, more peaceful, more righteous, but you love the raw material

in the meantime, all the time.

And now let me conclude by returning to a point I mentioned in passing at the start of this talk. It's about the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, the Mass.

As many of you know, the Mass is the center of Catholic life and teaching, and at the center of the Mass is the transformation, according to Catholic thought, of ordinary bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the real presence of Christ. The doctrines that have been formulated to express this mystery have proved to be one of the sharpest points of division between Catholics and Protestants, and much work remains if we are to overcome this division and help heal the body of Christ broken by the church.

My contribution to this process may be slight, and what would make me a very poor Catholic, is my lack of interest in what happens to the bread and wine in the Eucharist. I don't care what happens to the elements; I only care what happens to the people who receive them. How and why and whether the elements become the body and blood of Christ is of no great significance to me; the only significance the Lord's Supper has for me is its power to change people's lives, and if lives are not changed for the better as a result of that meal, then we eat and drink unworthily and in vain. That makes me Protestant – very low-church Protestant.

The transformation that matters to me, as a Christian and as a minister of the gospel of reconciliation, is the transformation that happens in the human person, when a person says I've had enough of living for me and my family or my community or my nation or my tribe or my persuasion, and now I'm going to live for God. I'm going to live for God in my personal relationships, I'm going to live for God in my professional relationships, I'm going to live for God in my economic relationships, I'm going to live for God in my political relationships, and I'm going to live for God in my relationships with God's creation. When a person says I have seen, in the life and teachings, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, what it means for a human being to live for God in all their relationships, and that's what I want for myself, now and always, and I'm prepared to sacrifice whatever of myself it takes to establish that relationship and keep it – when a person says that, my friends, that is when you become a Christian, no matter when you were baptized. And that's the new life that's waiting for you when you're ready to let go and let God.

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” Thanks, thanks be to God.