

## Yes We Can

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The Last Sunday after Epiphany  
Transfiguration Sunday  
February 14, 2010

Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:1-6; Luke 9:28-36

Text: "Our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." -- 2 Corinthians 3:5b-6

Some of you may be thinking, on the basis of the title of this morning's sermon, that I've fallen into a time warp and am still campaigning for Barak Obama. Let me reassure you that this is a sermon about us and God, not about us and President Obama. The title of my sermon is well-known, thanks to the Obama campaign, but it's actually based not on presidential politics but on the apostle Paul and his assertion that he was fit to do what God had called him to do not because of his own competence, but because of the competence given to him by God. Paul was able to do what God wanted him to do – to be a minister of a new covenant – through the empowerment that came from God. Paul was a living example of what St. Augustine would ask of God many centuries later, "Grant what you command, and then command what you will," and all the great teachers in the Christian tradition have known that basic truth: we are able to do more than we can do on our own, more than we can do together, more, even, than we can imagine through the competence that comes not from ourselves, but from God.

That's Paul's word of God to us this morning, and it was his word of God to the Christians at Corinth a long time ago. It was a word he needed to speak, because Paul's competence to be a minister of a new covenant, for those Christians, was not the foregone conclusion it is for us. Their Paul wasn't our Paul. Their Paul wasn't the great architect of the Christian faith we consider him today. Paul to the Corinthians was one of several evangelists who'd experienced a life-changing encounter with the risen Jesus Christ, and his message was one of several that was competing for the loyalty of people who wished to have that same encounter themselves.

We know from his letters that Paul had competition, and we can well imagine that Paul had to overcome considerable suspicion and hostility toward him on the part of the first Christians. You'll recall that in his early career, he'd been a Christian-basher, the Saul of Tarsus who'd gone around, according to Acts, "breathing threats and murder" against Jesus' disciples, and he had a lot of convincing to do if he was to persuade the Christians at Corinth and elsewhere that he'd changed.

And Paul often writes in his letters that he had, that through God's grace, he'd become a radically different person from the zealot he'd been for Judaism in his days of opposing the Jesus movement. He can even speak of having disappeared altogether through his conversion. As he told the Galatians, "[I]t is no longer I who live, but it is **Christ who** lives in me."

That's change – radical, life-transforming change, and because Paul knew that he had undergone such a dramatic change in himself, he knew he did not – indeed, could not -- rely on his own competence, his own abilities, his own skills and powers of example or

persuasion to bring that change about in others. Paul's competence to be a minister of the new covenant of God's Spirit in the risen Christ, he knew, came from God.

And not only did that change transform Paul's life, it transformed the world as well, and that's where this morning's text and our efforts to be agents of change in our world intersect. Hear again the word of God according to the apostle Paul: "Our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

The letter that Paul was referring to was not Judaism – let's bury that hoary old stereotype once and for all – but rather the legalism – the appeal to the dead hand of tradition preserved in texts and traditions based upon texts – the legalism that had caused the faith of Paul and Jesus and their ancestors to become an oppressive fossil for those to whom it had once been a source of spiritual and physical and social life. The killing letter Paul is referring to is not the Mosaic covenant, but rather the lifeless, graceless, spiritless manifestation of that covenant in the lives of the very people who had been called to make that covenant a blessing to the entire world.

And if Paul were alive today, he might very well be warning us about the lifeless, graceless, spiritless manifestation of the new covenant in the lives of people who call themselves the disciples of the Prince of Peace. Within a generation of Paul's own lifetime, the process of ossification had begun to set in in the Jesus movement itself. You can see signs of it already in the pastoral epistles in the New Testament, where a desire to keep the Spirit of the risen Christ changing the world has been replaced by a concern for institutional stability and good order. The charismatic movement around Jesus is becoming the institution of the Christian church, and the letter – who's in, who's out, who's a leader, who's a follower, what's acceptable behavior, what's not – the letter of those kinds of concerns is beginning to deaden the spirit that brought the movement to life in the first place.

And that's the danger all of us in this vast tent called the Christian faith continue to face today. We continue to run the very real risk of supplanting the spirit that was in Jesus Christ – a spirit of freedom, of breaking out of old habits, of crossing boundaries, of seeing God's truth in new ways, of living radically new lives as citizens of God's realm – we constantly run the risk of killing that spirit in the name of institutional stability and identity.

Isn't that what the fight about lesbian and gay folks in the church is all about? Isn't that a fight about clutching tightly to the way we've always seen things and done things and believed things in the face of significantly changed historical realities?

And isn't that what the fight about the ordination of women is about? And isn't that what the fight about the care of God's creation is about? And isn't that what the fight about so many other things inside and outside the church is about – our resisting the Spirit of God at work in us, the Spirit that wants to make us light and salt and leaven? The church is so resistant to change we often prefer to die than change; as some wag has said, the seven last words of the church will be, "We've never done it that way before."

But, like Paul, we do not lose hope, because we believe that change is possible. The catchphrase of our day may be "It is what it is," but we believe that tired resignation to the world's realities – including the realities that we are ourselves – is not our only option. We Christians believe that we can be changed, and through the change in us, the world also can be changed. And that change does not come from us; it comes from God. And thus does our competence to be ministers of that new covenant of grace also come from God.

Yes, we can change. With God's help and our own sincere desire, yes we can. Not one of us here this morning is a victim of circumstance. We're not a victim of our age or

race or gender or our sexual orientation or our socio-economic background. We're not a victim of our dysfunctional family or the genetic hand of cards dealt us at our birth or the illnesses we've fought or the addictions we've battled. We are not victims of a liberal media or a terrorist plot or a corrupt government or a bad Sunday School. We are not victims at all.

We are victors. We are conquerors and we are more than conquerors through him who loved us and gave himself for us. Jesus Christ was the victim for all of us so that we might be freed from every form of victimization others or we ourselves would try to impose on us. For freedom Christ has set us free, Paul told the Galatians, and the freedom we so desperately need in our moment in history is freedom from the self-defeating and self-destroying belief that we cannot change. Yes. We. Can. We can because the power to change comes not from us, but from God, who has promised – promised – that if we will let it, the Spirit of transforming change that was in Jesus Christ will be in us also, making us the new creation that is our glory and delight.

To the God who has made that promise and given us that gift, be our thanks and praise, forever and ever. Amen.