

A New Creation – Galatians 6:11-18 - 11/19/23 – Ron Righter

I remember a time ten or so years ago, when I was feeling lost, and struggling to find a way to revitalize my life. I was, as they say, at sixes and sevens, somehow lost and wandering a bit.

Perhaps I was already sensing that I needed something more in my life. Maybe I was already on the path that a few years later led me here, back to the faith I had known many years earlier.

But one day I came up with a new phrase which I could utter every morning when I got up. The phrase was “begin anew”. It’s just two words, but somehow it seemed to my aging self, like a good way to recharge my batteries every morning.

The key is the word “new” – “begin anew”. It seems like a great way to take something that has been around for a long time and revitalize it. To breathe new life into the life that I had been living for sixty years.

Don’t we all love the new, the fresh. A new day, a new car, a new house, a new perspective on things. A new life that has enlarged our family. I want you, now, to think about the new things, the new people, the new events that are important to you. It may be something that has entered your own life recently, or a new event that has freshened your perspective on the world.

Aren’t we fascinated by and drawn to the new? I think people always have been. The apostle Paul, 2,000 years ago, had a new experience that changed his life when he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus. We’ve been hearing, in our sermons the last couple months, from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. And we’ve heard him describe his transformation from a zealous Jew who persecuted Christians into an apostle for Christ, spreading the word of God’s new kingdom that was ushered in by Christ’s death and resurrection.

Our scripture today comes from the end of Paul’s letter to the Galatians – chapter 6, verses 12 to 18. As I read, you will be reminded of the themes and ideas we’ve been hearing about during our series on Galatians – circumcision and is it needed or not, the ancient law of the Jewish people, the life of the flesh in which the idol-worshipping Galatians dwelt before Paul introduced them to life in the Spirit. Paul is reminding the Galatians of his original message and warns them not to be misled when they hear a different message from others.

Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh.

These people Paul is talking about are those who oppose his message of life in the Spirit, life in Christ. Paul continues and refers to his own devotion to Christ.

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

And here is Paul's conclusion.

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is **the new creation**.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

God, be with us today as we study your word. Help the Holy Spirit to guide us as we contemplate Your new creation, brought into the world through the death and resurrection of Your son. Amen

In his letter to the Galatians Paul tells them what this new creation is – it is the Kingdom of God – initiated with the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is just getting off the ground among the Galatians, one of his newly-established Christian communities.

Now imagine that you are one of the Galatians who has heard the words from Paul's letter read aloud to your congregation during worship. You even remember the day, a couple years earlier, when Paul first visited your town. You had heard about this man from far away who delivered a strange message. Finally, one day you come to hear him, bringing your family along, and you gather with others as he stands before you and delivers his message.

What did he say to you?

That you are welcomed into the community of believers in one God. That you are free. You are a Gentile and so you are freed from the worship of false idols, so prevalent in your community. And that you are freed from your former bondage to sin. All you need is faith in Christ. Paul is leading you from your old way of life into a new life in Christ.

These words resonate within and you feel the change. You are alive in Christ and Christ lives in you. You are a new creation.

Today, here in Missoula, in this very sanctuary, these words, this message, may strike your heart as well. You are welcomed into the grace of God. You are free from your former bondage to sin, free in Christ. Just hold onto the faith. The Holy Spirit dwells within you, and you can live as one of the forgiven people.

You, just like that Galatian 2,000 years ago, are a new creation.

Our culture, our world, our lives today are so different from those people in Galatia so long ago. We see ourselves first and foremost as individuals. They saw themselves first as members of a group, of a community. It's easy to forget what such differences mean. When we read Paul and see the word "you", we often take it to mean just ourselves.

But I learned a couple years ago, when I studied theology at Whitworth University, over the mountains in Spokane, that when Paul uses the Greek word that we translate as "you", he almost always means "you" in the plural. He wasn't talking so much to the individual Galatian, but rather to the community of believers – to all the people to whom he had addressed his letter.

They were, as a group, a new creation. NT Wright tells us in his biography of Paul – called Paul: A Biography – that Paul was building out God’s new kingdom one community at a time. The cities of Galatia, scattered across a large plain in south central Turkey, were among the first he visited and wrote letters to. Many others would follow - Corinth, Phillippi, Ephesus, Thessalonika, Rome – but Galatia was the first.

Here Paul was doing God’s work, helping the local people build not only a new community, but a new kind of community. A community based on a new way of being human. A community that would unite Jew and Gentile into a fellowship centered around faith in Christ. A new creation.

But Paul sees danger for his Galatian communities. Some people there are falling away from the path he laid out for them in his original visit. The divide between Jew and Gentile threatens to undo the work he has done. Visitors are telling the locals that they must adhere to Jewish custom. They must be circumcised. They must follow the dietary laws of Judaism. In short, to be a follower of Christ, they must first become Jews.

This is the opposite of what Paul has taught them. If you have faith in Christ and faith is all you need, then you are in Christ, and he is in you. Now, faith doesn’t mean to carry a belief in your head and get emotional. It means trusting in Christ, in his promise, knowing that he will always be there. He has said to the Galatians, all of you, whatever your ethnic or religious background, if you believe, are united in Christ. You all are a new creation.

Paul chides the Galatians for forgetting what he taught them, and he encourages them to stand firm against those who would tell them otherwise.

We too, living in our time, must stand firm against those who oppose the unity offered by Christ. Do we find ourselves, here in the church, sometimes pulling apart, separating from one another, dividing into factions and cliques? Are we divided over politics, church decisions, or theological questions? Do we sometimes feel pulled by the many forces in our culture that draw us away from what we know is right?

Let’s remember Paul in chapter 5, verse 6 talking about faith – “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything, but faith working through love.” And a few verses later, he reminds us to “love your neighbor as yourself.” And finally, in chapter five, verses 22 and 23, he points us to fruits of the spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Of course, the divisions and temptations troubling the Galatian believers are not found only there. They are found throughout the whole world that Paul knows, from Palestine in the east to Rome in the west. Traditional Jews, still holding firmly to their belief that the Messiah has not yet come, are offended by Paul’s message. They ask how this Jesus, who died the humiliating death of crucifixion, could possibly be the Messiah promised by God? And they certainly would not accept that the law of Moses, to which they have devoted themselves, is being supplanted by this new Messiah.

Then there are the Jews who follow Jesus, based in Jerusalem, and believe he is the Messiah. Yet they are wary. Will they be accused by the more traditional Jews of betraying their faith? Are they going to support Paul in his outreach to the idol-worshipping Gentiles?

Then there are the Gentiles themselves – people who worship many Gods, and for whom idol worship is not only their religion but also a major part of their economy.

And finally, the Roman authorities and their supporters, who bring the arrogance of a conqueror, and are devoted to enforcing not only law and order, but also worship of the emperor.

All of these cultures, living next to one another, sometimes amicably, but other times in conflict and even hatred. Out of this stew of humanity, with all its variety, Paul is laboring mightily to build out the Kingdom of God.

NT Wright offers a great metaphor for Paul's task. How many of you have ever remodeled a house? I don't mean one or two rooms; instead I mean the entire house. Tearing down and moving walls so that the interior looks entirely different when you are done.

Now, how many of you have remodeled the whole house while still living in it? You can't escape the mess and chaos.

This, according to Wright, is exactly what Paul is attempting. To bring belief in the newly arrived Kingdom of God, this radical new form of community, this new model for humans living side by side, into being. He can't get rid of the people and do the rebuilding himself. The people themselves must be shown the way. They must do the work. Even more, they are the material out of which this new creation must be formed. They are both worker and material. They are the hands and the brick and mortar. They must be shown how to shape themselves into this new way of living, into God's new creation.

Is Paul going to succeed in his ambitious building project? Or is he going to pull the whole house down around his ears?

We can look back and see that he did succeed. We have 2,000 years of history in which Christendom grew to dominance. Yet the world still looks similar. We are still a house divided. Not just divided in two, but divided over many questions, pulled apart into factions. We have both believers and non-believers in religion, and in many social justice and political causes. We suffer from division by nation, by race, by language and ethnicity.

Yet we are still a new creation. The Kingdom of God is here – initiated with the death and resurrection of Christ, to be completed only in the final days when Christ returns. What we can do each day when we rise, is to begin anew, to continue the work that Paul began in Galatia 2,000 years ago, to mold and shape ourselves until we conform to God's new creation.

Amen.