

New Creation!

II Corinthians 5:16-21

Third Sunday after Pentecost (June 13), 2021

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Why go on? Why do we go on trying? Well, we don't go on trying. Trying is not what we must do. We go on not because of our ideals, but because of what God did for us in Christ. We go on because of St. Paul's imperative: "Be reconciled!" Katallegete! Be what you are. Be what God's new creation in Christ has made you... We cannot make an order out of an idea. However, we can participate in the order already made, not by us, but for us – for all of us – in Christ.

- Will D. Campbell, *Our Grade is "F"*

After being launched in Sept. of 1977, the space probe known as Voyager 1 was making its way out of the far reaches of our solar system in Feb. of 1990. Near Pluto and out beyond Neptune, NASA scientists decided to rotate the craft so that it could look backwards from where it had come. Much like leaving home for the last time, there was this sense of pausing and looking back at "home" from 4 billion miles away. Voyager took a series of 60 photos included a "family portrait" of the solar system: of Neptune, Uranus, Saturn, Jupiter, and Venus. And then there is Earth – just a point of light, about a pixel in size. Astrophysicist Carl Sagan called it "a Pale Blue Dot."

Not long afterwards, Sagan came out with a book with the photos. He wrote, "Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us.... Every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended on a sunbeam. Our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some

privileged position in the Universe, is challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from somewhere else to save us from ourselves” (from Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*).

There are times when we pause and look at the big picture. We see a picture of our home Earth from 4 billion miles away and we reflect on who we are, why we’re here, and what are we doing with our pale blue dot? Another perspective can reorient us and give us clarity. We’re so busy trying to get through Tuesday, that we lose sense of why we’re here in the first place.

In today’s scripture reading, the Apostle Paul says, from now on we no longer view things from a human point of view (II Cor. 5:16a). Like Sagan and the NASA photo, Paul invites us to look at the big picture, and view the cosmos and ourselves from a new perspective.

Paul says, even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way (5:16b). What Paul is probably talking about is his own changed perspective going back years to when he was still known as Saul and was among the most zealous and dedicated religious leaders in trying to put a stop to this new Jesus Movement. Saul was blinded by a bright light and heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, I am Jesus. I’m the one you are persecuting.” That bright light and voice changed Saul’s perspective, so much so that he changed his name to Paul, and never saw the world or anyone in it the same way ever again.

Rick Lischer says that Paul was like a person who has had both cataracts removed. What was shrouded in a fine mist suddenly sparkles with newfound clarity” (from *Just Tell the Truth*, p. 147). Paul sees with new eyes, “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (5:19).

New Testament scholars point out that the Greek language has a standard word for “world,” the planet Earth, but Paul chose another word that has a much more comprehensive, large meaning. It’s the same word that Sagan made famous in his 1980 PBS TV series *Cosmos*. The Greek word *kosmos* is the big picture word for everything: the planet Earth, the stars, the universe, time, history, culture, geography – everything, including you and me.

Here is a small, pale blue marble I’ve placed on the edge of the pulpit. For a moment it gives us a sense of this big picture. The entire cosmos, Paul says is being reconciled, healed, atoned, and made whole. Everything, the entire universe and all that is in it, including you and me, Paul says, is part of the new creation in Christ. Not simply a band-aide or some reform, not tinkering and adjusting or some course corrections but a complete and totally new creation.

Years ago, we had a Sunday night series of conversations in which one of us would talk about our work and how we saw it as part of our being a Christian disciple. I remember the late Jack Decker, who was the retired chair of the Physics Dept. talking about how profoundly moved he was whenever he looked through a telescope at the vast universe. It gave him perspective of the great work of God.

During that same series of conversations, Fred Rainwater, who was a biology professor, talked about how moved he was in looking through a

microscope at the unbelievably complex and wonderful world of cells and microbes. He too saw the great work of God in the smallest of ways.

Telescope to microscope, solar systems to cellular biology – all part of the new cosmos God is bringing about in Christ.

Most of you know that one of my mentors and heroes was the old ornery Baptist Will Campbell, who died 8 years ago this month. Will was a White Baptist who grew up in Mississippi, went to Yale Divinity School, and became one of the very few White activists in the Civil Rights Movement. He escorted the Little Rock Nine high school students who integrated Little Rock Central High School in 1957, was the only White person in the room also in 1957 when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was organized with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as President. In 1960 at Shaw Univ. in Raleigh, NC Will was present in the room when the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was organized with young John Lewis. Will did not consider himself a civil rights activist; he was a preacher going about the “ministry of reconciliation.” The theme of his life was this same Scripture passage we have read this morning.

Preacher and pastor Mack Dennis called Will a “backward” looking preacher. He didn’t mean he wore old-fashioned clothes (though he did wear old hats and often looked as if he just walked off of a Mississippi farm of the 1930’s). Will was “backward” because he tended to look at the big picture of what God was doing and then work backwards from there. In the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, Will Campbell saw the inauguration of God’s New Creation, in which God was reconciling the entire cosmos and healing and redeeming everyone and everything in Christ. And I mean everyone. From his work in the Civil Rights Movement to visiting those in prison to visiting members of the Ku Klux Klan and on and on – all Will did was because we are reconciled in Christ. He had the big

picture in mind and worked back from that. Will believed our calling is to join in and live it out. “Be reconciled to God,” as Paul says in verse 21, and when we are reconciled with God then we live out that reconciliation with one another.

Most of the time, we start on the front end. We start with our local problems seeking solutions. Our local racism or poverty or payday lenders, or ecological concerns or housing or ... But I think the Apostle Paul, and probably Will Campbell, might say, “These are good questions and important concerns that must be addressed. But I’m wondering why you always begin at the wrong end. Have you ever thought of starting with the answer and allow it to shape the question? Why not start with the vision of what God’s big picture is and then work backward from there?”

Instead of beginning with “Why are they like that?” what if we started with, “we are reconciled in Christ” or instead of “I don’t trust them” we began with “everything old has passed away, if anyone is in Christ there is new creation!” or instead of “they don’t look right” we begin with “we no longer see with a human point of view.” It doesn’t mean that everything will be easy but it does mean that we are working in and with and toward the big picture, not outside of it or against it. New creation! That’s what God has done in Christ, is doing in Christ, and will finally culminate in Christ.

When Paul wrote this letter to the church in Corinth, this was a congregation divided. He had spent a lot of time with them, had written at least one previous letter to them, and most scholars believe two previous letters. But they were killing him with their division and disagreements. There was a whispering campaign against Paul – apparently, he wasn’t much to look at and was only a mediocre preacher, and they had several preachers who were handsome, smart, full of charisma, and each of these super-preachers had their own sub-group of followers,

all competing with the other super-preachers and their followers. The church had some people who were really, really spiritual and self-righteous competing with others who believed different doctrines. It was a mess.

In the middle of it all, with a congregation in conflict and chaos that would have driven anyone else over the edge, Paul had the ability to see the big picture of what God was doing and how the church in Corinth fitted in.

Usually we translate verse 17 as “If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation.” But in the Greek, it is simply and explosively, “If anyone is in Christ – new creation! Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” For Paul – New Creation! – explosive! Because of Christ it is a new big bang!

Martin Luther King was another person who saw the eschatological big picture shaping everything else. A favorite quote of his was, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” King scholar Rick Lischer says that he believes that it was this vision that allowed Dr. King to see his many trials and tribulations within something larger than himself and larger than his own organization (*Just Tell the Truth*, p. 149).

It meant when John Lewis and others marched against voter suppression across the Selma bridge on what came to be known as Bloody Sunday in 1965, even though they were chased down and beaten by state troopers, Lewis knew that he was “walking with the wind of God” blowing through the universe and not against it.

It means that when we supported the Tarsands Blockade and stood against the Keystone XL pipeline, that we were moving with the grain of the universe and not against it. When Betty and Beverly were married yesterday, we were moving with the remaking of the universe. And every vigil, every act of protest for justice,

every time we sing a hymn to the glory of God, sit down and teach a child the way of mercy and goodness of Christ, create something beautiful, care for someone patiently, or serve sacrificially we are part of what God is doing in the entire cosmos.

And when we pray and sit down in human relationships, the sometimes lengthy and often complicated process of reconciliation with each other, of saying, “I’m sorry,” “I forgive you” and “I love you” – usually in that order, then something new is being created, and some new possibility for the future is making its first appearance.

This is hard work. It is heart-of-the-gospel work. Reconciliation on a personal level or social level usually involves repentance, forgiveness, and reparation, repairing and healing. It means humility and openness to the other, and humility and openness most especially to God.

There are times when although we know that God is making the entire cosmos new, and reconciling everyone and everything in Christ, there are situations in which we are unable to reconcile at the moment. It’s just too hard. The wounds are too deep and the distance is too great. Yet, we are to keep praying knowing that we are to be reconcilers, that we are ambassadors of the new creation even though we cannot do it right now. We keep praying and confess our inability to reconcile on our own.

That’s when Christ comes and says, “Reconcile with me.” When we are unable, for whatever reason, to open our arms to another, Christ opens his arms to us. Paul says, “Since God is making his appeal through us, we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (v. 5:20). Because of what God in Christ has done for us, we are reconciled with God and in turn, by God’s power and God’s reconciling love, we will be able to reconcile with those whom we believe it

is impossible to reconcile with. With us, it is impossible. With God in Christ, all things are possible.

Many of you will remember the terrible shooting in Oct. of 2006 in the Amish one-room school in Nickel Mines, PA, in which shooter Charles Roberts took hostages and shot eight out of ten girls (ages 6–13), killing five, before dying by suicide in the schoolhouse. The response by the Amish community was what we all remember and which made world-wide news.

The Amish, part of the Anabaptist movement, and probably unknown to us, are our cousins in the great family of the church. Reconciliation is part of their multi-generational DNA. Their reflex is to love and forgive, which did not mean there was no grief, shock, and intense pain, but that even in the extraordinary grief, they knew in their bones that they were to forgive and reconcile. They had practiced it for centuries, and for hundreds of years they knew they were ambassadors of Christ's reconciliation. They gathered with each other to pray and console and care and they also reached out to the family of the shooter.

Marie Roberts, the widow of the shooter, later wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbors thanking them for their forgiveness, grace, and mercy. She wrote, "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

Mennonite scholar Donald Kraybill noted that peacemaking and forgiveness is a deeply rooted value in Amish culture. He explained that the Amish willingness to forgo vengeance does not undo the tragedy or pardon the wrong, but rather "constitutes a first step toward a future that is more hopeful" (all from *Wikipedia*).

Did you hear these key phrases: Marie Roberts, the widow of the shooter said, that the Amish forgiveness of her family is “changing our world” and Kraybill said they consider their actions “a first step toward a future that is more hopeful.”

That’s big picture kind of language. From the telescope to the microscope, from the outer reaches of the cosmos to Nickel Mines, PA to where we live and who we live with today – the gospel of Christ is reconciliation.

Back when Carl Sagan looked at our Pale Blue Dot, he said, “Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from somewhere else to save us from ourselves.”

But the Apostle Paul responds, “In Christ, the cosmic vastness has been bridged. We are reconciled. There is new creation.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.