

Renewing Our Commitment 2 Corinthians 5:17-20

A New Creation in Christ

We live in a time when reconciliation is desperately needed. Whether we're talking about our divided societies, polarized politics, or even strained personal relationships, it's clear that people are increasingly at odds with one another. Have you ever walked through a neighborhood and felt the tension in the air? I have, especially during election season. You see one yard with a "Biden for Prison" sign and the next with a "Trump for Prison" sign, and you just know those neighbors aren't sharing barbecues anytime soon. It's like a physical reminder of how divided we are, not just here, but all over the world.

The Apostle Paul, in the passage we read today, tells us that God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. It's a big, fancy word, but at its core, it means bringing people back together—back to each other and back to God. And guess what? That's our job! We're called to be peacemakers, the ones who bridge the gap between people, just like Jesus did for us.

But let's be real—reconciliation isn't easy. It's tough to love people who think, vote, or live differently than we do. It means we have to change, too. And that change starts with letting Jesus into our hearts.

Paul says something pretty amazing: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!" (v. 17) That's not just a nice thought; it's a life-changing reality. Being a new creation means we start to see the world differently. Our priorities shift, and our purpose in life isn't just about us anymore—it's about something bigger. You know the saying, "Study hard so you can get ahead"? Well, as new creations, that becomes, "Study hard so you can help others." It's a total mindset shift. Success isn't just about what we achieve; it's about how we use our lives to make the world a better place. And as new creations, we don't judge others by the same old standards—rich or poor, left or right. Instead, we see everyone as made in God's image, and our job is to help that image shine.

Of course, becoming a new creation isn't easy. Many of us are content with just going to church once a week, praying for a little peace in our lives, and leaving it at that. But when we do that, we risk making God's word fit our lives instead of letting it change us.

When I served at my previous church, a young couple started attending. They came to Sunday worship for about a month and mentioned they liked the church. As a pastor of a small congregation, I was excited about the possibility of new members. But one Sunday, they left the service in a hurry without even saying 'goodbye.' I figured they had an urgent family matter to attend to. Later that week, I got a phone call from one of them, complaining about my sermon. That week, I had preached on the Beatitudes from the Gospel of Luke, which blesses the poor and warns the rich. My message emphasized the need to stand together against inequality. I think my sermon made them uncomfortable because they probably identified with the rich. The woman bluntly said, 'We can't solve poverty, so why talk about it?' I responded, 'But Jesus told us to care for the poor.' She reluctantly agreed but never returned to the church. Some people resist change and try to mold the gospel to fit their own beliefs. Change is hard.

Becoming a "new creation" and experiencing a true transformation isn't easy. Even pastors struggle with this. Do I always live exactly as I preach? No, I don't. Has my life completely changed according to the Lord's teachings? It's hard to confidently say, "Yes." I've shared these concerns with fellow pastors during our Monday sermon preparations, and they all

understood. But one pastor pointed out that becoming a new creation involves both God's work and our efforts, and we need to maintain the tension between these two. If we think we can become new creations just by our own efforts, we risk falling into self-righteousness and hypocrisy. On the other hand, if we believe God will do everything without any effort on our part, our lives will show no change, and we'll live no differently than those who don't believe. This tension emerges between the sovereignty of God and the free will of human beings.

Let me ask you a question. Do you think God can make someone believe in God, regardless of that person's willingness? If you say 'yes,' you're leaning toward Calvinism. Do you know Methodist's answer? Methodists would say both 'yes and no.' From a Methodist perspective, there's one thing God doesn't do alone: making someone accept God into their heart. God first gives us grace, enabling us to respond to God's calling, so in that sense, 'yes,' God can lead people to believe. But God doesn't force belief; that's left to human free will. So, in another sense, 'no,' God cannot make someone believe. Methodism emphasizes human responsibility in responding to God's call. Being a new creation in Christ is a gift from God, but it also requires our response and constant effort to live as that new creation. God invites, empowers, and guides us to be a new creation but God doesn't simply transform us. We need to respond to God's calling to be a new creation.

Ambassadors for Christ

As new creations, Paul says we're also ambassadors for Christ. That means we represent Jesus in everything we do. We're the ones who are supposed to be building bridges, not walls. We are called to reconciliation. In Christian belief, sin is simply separation from God. All other sins and evils—like poverty, hunger, racism, violence, and war—stem from this division between God and humanity. When we're separated from God, our love for others naturally fades. Reconciliation is about healing this broken relationship, and reignite the flame of love for other. God calls us to be agents of reconciliation between God and the world. How do we do this? By allowing others to see and feel God's presence through us. We believe we are created in God's image, which means everyone has inherent sacredness and dignity. It also means that we are the bearers of God's image and thus, we should and can help others sense and glimpse the invisible God through our actions and presence.

Have you ever seen God smile? Let me show you what I mean. [ppt] When you see her smile, I think you'll understand. When Mother Teresa saw people suffering from hunger and poverty in Calcutta, she didn't question God's existence. Instead, she asked God what she could do to help, and decided to show God's presence to those in desperate situations. She opened a Home for the Dying, giving people a chance to die with dignity.

One day, a man visited the Home for the Dying. He silently walked to where the dying women were being cared for and stopped beside a nun who was tending to a woman covered in filth and maggots. As he watched the nun, he realized that it was God's love giving her the strength to do this work. The man then turned to Mother Teresa and said, "I came here filled with hatred, but now I'm leaving with God in my heart. I saw God's love in that nun as she cared for the sick woman as if she were caring for Christ." Mother Teresa believed we must be the "living presence of Christ wherever we go." Yes, we can show God's loving hands and smiling face to those around us.

But we can also see Christ's smile when we love and serve those in need. One day, Mother Teresa picked up a man from the street whose body was covered with worms. We can imagine how difficult his life was. She brought him to the Home for the Dying. What amazed

Mother Teresa was that he didn't complain or blame anyone. He simply said, "I've lived like an animal in the street, but I'm going to die like an angel, loved and cared for!" It took about three hours to clean him. Finally, the man looked up at Mother Teresa and the other nuns and said, "Sister, I'm going home to God." Then he passed away. Mother Teresa wrote, "I've never seen such a radiant smile on a human face as the one I saw on that man's face. He went home to God. See what love can do! The young sister may not have realized it at the moment, but she was touching the body of Christ. Jesus said, "As often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me" (Matthew 25:40). And this is where you and I fit into God's plan."

As ambassadors for Christ, we are called to do the same. But you don't have to be a Mother Teresa to make a difference. Every time you smile at someone, every time you lend a hand, you're showing them God's love. And guess what? When you serve others, you'll see Christ in their faces too. I believe Asbury UMC already participates in this work to build God's kin-dom and reconciliation. Haven't you seen the smile of Christ on the faces of people when you share an Asbury care bag? Can you imagine Christ smiling through the faces of children who will receive our school supplies as the new school year begins? This is what we are called to do as Ambassadors for Christ. During this midyear pause, remember that you are a new creation in Christ and renew your commitment to this joyful calling—to share the love and smile of God with our neighbors. Amen.