

March 18, 2007
2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Sermon: “Wouldn’t It Be Great to Start All Over Again?”

Text: “*So...in Christ there is a new creation...*”

I’m getting to that age where it’s difficult for people to figure out what to buy me for birthday gifts, and Christmas presents. I get lots of articles of clothing, and I appreciate that. I hate to go shopping for clothing, so when someone else does the work for me, so much the better. I get lots of socks and shirts, a few ties and an occasional package of men’s briefs! I’m a happy fellow.

I also get gift certificates to local bookstores: Borders, Barnes & Noble, Cokesbury. I guess people figure that’s an easy decision, buying me gift certificates to bookstores. After all, have you seen my office lately? But I’m going to share a secret with you: I don’t like going to bookstores, either. I have nothing against books, or people who love to read books. I myself am an unrepentant *bibliophile* (that’s someone who loves books). And I love reading.

What bothers me about bookstores – the modern, chain store variety of bookstore – is that they’re really not for people who love

books. At least, not in the way that I love books. They're for people who love to sip gourmet coffee, and strong espresso, and flavored lattes. And they make you feel like you're out of place if you're not there to spend your time doing the same.

And I've noticed something about the chain store bookstores, especially. If you go to one of those establishments, you'll find that the largest section, and the section that keeps on growing and growing, is the "Self-Help" section. Some stores call it "Self-Improvement" but it doesn't matter. Same thing. Americans seem to be infatuated with the need for improvement.

I guess, after decades of being told that we need to accept ourselves, and affirm ourselves, and learn to love ourselves "just as we are," there must still be in us a discontent with ourselves "just as we are," because apparently we want to be better. We want to improve.

Not long after I entered the ministry, I got a package in the mail. And when I opened that package, it was a book, sent to me free of charge by the author, Robert Schuller. The book was called

Self-Esteem, and I think it was subtitled *You Can Be the Person You Want to Be*. You may have seen Dr. Schuller on his television show *The Hour of Power* which is broadcast from The Chrystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California.

In his book *Self Esteem* Dr Schuller says that you and I are suffering from *low* self-esteem, and that what the church needs to do about that is to get away from all this talk about sin and repentance, and just tell people that God loves them and wants them to have a higher view of themselves, and live a happy life. Higher self-esteem – that’s what we all need, according to Dr. Schuller. And he congratulates the reader of his book for taking that first important step toward recovery. You’ve bought his book, he says, so you must want to improve your life. And that’s good.

Then he tells us how we can change. He suggests a healthy work ethic for one thing. Get up early and spend the first portion of your day thinking positive thoughts about the day ahead. Don’t waste your time in thinking negative thoughts – like asking for your sins to be forgiven. Remember, it’s your self-esteem that’s

important above all else, and there's only so much time in which to improve it, so get cracking.

Set aside some time each day to write one letter to someone who has touched your life in a positive way, thanking them for their influence on you. Then volunteer two hours per week, read at least one positive book, have three conversations each day with people who are positive, and so on and so on. I think you get the idea.

And I got to tell you, folks, by the end of the book, I was so depressed about all the things that I *wasn't* doing in order to be a better person, that my self-esteem took a real beating. So, I just decided to stay who I was!

How long did you keep this year's New Year's resolutions?
Do you even still make New Year's resolutions?

Change comes hard for us, doesn't it? We are creatures of habit. We are conditioned by a lifetime of habits and routines and busy schedules to react to the world in certain ways, and there's not much that's going to change that. We love the conventional

and the predictable. Variety may be the spice of life, but let's face it – too much variety really scares us. We're comfortable with our routines.

I know someone who has counseled people for many years in a pastoral counseling agency. I asked, one day, what he'd learned in thirty years of counseling. And this is what he said: "People almost never, ever change."

When Jim and Tammy Bakker fell from grace, almost twenty years ago, there were tearful pleas for forgiveness, and incredulous denials that they had ever done anything wrong. But a lengthy court trial, and a public divorce, and many revelations in the media later, told a different story. And although they were visibly humbled through the loss of everything they had, they are back at it again. Still denying that they did anything wrong. We just don't change too easily.

So the writer of Ecclesiastes says that there's nothing really new under the sun (1:9). When it comes to life, it's just the same old thing over and over again (1:4-11).

And yet, something inside of us clings to the notion that maybe – just maybe – things can be different. Maybe God has created us for something more than this. How is it possible for people like you and me to change?

Well, for people like us, it's well-nigh impossible. I really don't give much credit to pull-yourself-up-by-the-boot-straps kind of self-improvement schemes. To be the kind of people we want to be, the kind of people we ought to be, the kind of people God intends us to be, we can't just wish it to happen. You can't just take a deep breath, think positive thoughts, follow a three-step program, and pull yourself up by your psychological bootstraps. Minor improvement may be a possibility, but real, fundamental, life-changing improvement is something way beyond the grasp of most human beings.

That's why the apostle Paul's assertion seems so amazing and almost bizarre to our modern ears. He says, "*If anyone is in Christ, [he or she] is a new creation!*"

New, he says; brand new. Like light coming into darkness. Like enemies being made into friends. Like getting a brand-spanking new body to replace the older model. Brand new.

We think of creation, the Genesis story, when God's Spirit brooded over the dark, chaotic waters, and light and life were brought forth. That's our introduction to this God, this Creator God, this God who says in the very last book of the Bible, "*See, I am making all things new*" (21:5).

We think of the God who faithfully led his people out of slavery, safely through the waters of the Red Sea, and plunked them down smack-dab in the middle of the Promised Land, where they could begin a new existence. Here is a God, Isaiah tells us, who just loves to keep on doing "*a new thing*" (43:19).

Those opening words from Genesis kind of set the tone for the rest of the Bible: "*In the beginning...*" Think of the whole of Scripture as creation, and new creation. Ezekiel says that there will come a day when God breathes on us again, even as God breathed upon the waters at the creation of the world, and brought forth life.

Ezekiel says that God will “*put a new spirit within them*” (11:19). A new, life-giving breath that will rattle and shake the old dead bones, and put flesh back on them again. Again, Ezekiel has God saying, “*A new heart I will give you*” (36:26). New breath, new heart, new life – do you believe it? Can God do such a thing?

So Paul says that if you are “in Christ” you are being made into a “new creation.” Genesis, the creation of the world from darkness and nothing, keeps happening all around us. And Easter, the bringing of life from death, keeps happening all around us, too.

You and I can’t be changed – fundamentally changed – by self-help and self-examination and self-improvement. But if you want to be different, my friend, and if you want to change and be changed in this life, if you want to make a fresh start, your change has to come from someone else, from someone else, someone greater than any of us: “*Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth... God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble... Now to him who by the power at*

work in us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to [God] be glory...for ever and ever. Amen.”

And Paul tells us that that power, that transcendent and transforming power has a name: Jesus. Placed deep within us, each of us, is One who knows us, knows everything about us, and yet wishes the best for us, always. Jesus wants us to become all that God created us to be. You and I were created, the Bible says, in the image of God. And although that image has become warped and cracked and corroded, and God’s plans for us have become distorted because of sin, God does not give up on us. God is always there for us. God is not through creating us – his creation is not finished.

God isn’t done with us, yet. Each day, God is drawing us nearer, refashioning us, reshaping us, restoring us to the people he wants us to be. It’s not a matter of self-help or self-determination. It’s a matter of God being faithful to his plans for our lives, and us (you and I) allowing God to do with us according to those plans. God keeps on working the plan, forming the strategy, creating and

recreating. And to be “in Christ” means that we let God make us into his new creation.

There used to be a popular beer commercial on the TV, where a guy drinks a swig of beer and says, “It doesn’t get any better than this.” Christians can’t say that, because this world, as good as it is, is not our final destination. Our lives, as noble as they may become, aren’t finished yet. We live in the promise of what we can become.

The promise of the Gospel is this: you can change because of Christ in you.

God keeps doing a new thing. And you’re it...and you...and you...and me. God is prejudicially disposed to renewing each and every one of us in Christ