

The Indwelling Christ

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Galatians 2: 15-21

A pastor shares this story: "I was attending a conference in South Carolina. One afternoon, in order to clear my head and regroup, I got into my car and drove around. As I was driving, I saw a rural church with an old cemetery. So I stopped and spent a little time there. I wanted to see how old some of the graves were. There was this one plot with a huge stone, which was for the head of the family, then a lot of burial plots on either side stretching out for some distance. This is low country with shallow soil, so people aren't buried in the soil. Rather they have a concrete slab the full length and size of the grave.

In this large plot, the one belonging to this one family, there was the most unusual thing. All the graves were lined up. There were small ones, sadly infants and children, and there were adult graves, quite a few of them. But there was one grave in which the slab was oblique, crosswise, slanted, what we used to call catty-wampus. Why was this one grave at such a strange angle, taking up extra space? It seemed a careless thing to do. Then I saw another man walking around the cemetery? I asked, 'Are you from around here?'

"He said, 'Yes, you're looking at that grave, aren't you?'

"Well, yes.'

"He said, 'I knew that fellow. We were in the same church. I knew him well, knew him all my life.'

"I asked, 'Why this burial at an angle?'

"Well, the family wanted it that way.'

"Why?'

"Because that's just the kind of guy he was. You see, he was just cross with everything. We never knew him to be pleased about anything, at home or at church. Just complained all the time. All the time. Everything anybody did was wrong. So when he died, the family decided that they wouldn't try to change him just because he was dead, so they buried him crosswise – buried him like he lived.'

"I said, 'Well that seems an awful thing to do.'

"He said, 'They wanted it to be a witness.'

"A witness?'

"Yes. The family said, if God wants to straighten him out, God can straighten him out. But he left this earth just how he lived.'"

You look around this world of ours, read the daily headlines, see the angry and hopeless deadlock in Washington, and it is easy to believe that nothing – people, politics, the world – really ever changes. What you see is what you get – nothing new under the sun. He was never going to change, so we buried him the way he lived. But is that true?

Another story, told by Fred Craddock: "When I returned to a church I once served a while back, I met a lot of people I was glad to see, and a few I didn't really care to see again. But there they were. There was one fellow in particular. Grumpy sort, a controlling man. He is one of those people in the church who act like they're in the background – 'Well, I don't know...I don't know' – but they are really in charge. He controlled his family, controlled his kids, controlled his grandkids, controlled the church, but acted like, 'I don't know, I don't know.' But he did and he does.

"I saw him coming. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. I shook hands with him and said, 'How're you doing?'

"He said, 'I'm doing all right.'

"I asked, somewhat hesitantly, 'How's the church?'

"He said, 'Better than we've ever been!'

"Really?'

"He said, 'God has been at work in our church.'

"I had never heard him say anything like that. I had only heard him criticize. 'God is at work in the church,' I said, 'That's just wonderful.'

"He said, 'We are in better shape spiritually and in every way than we have ever been in my memory.'

"I couldn't believe my ears. 'That is wonderful to hear,' I said, 'Who is your minister?'

"He said, 'We have a woman.' He never did give me her name. He just said, 'We have a woman.'

"I said, 'You do?'

"He answered, 'Yeah, I voted against her. My whole family voted against her. But we got outnumbered.' Then he said, 'I was wrong. I was wrong in my estimation of women, wrong about women ministers.' Then he looked me in the eye and said, 'Fred, if I was wrong about her, I was probably wrong about a lot of other stuff.'"

Says Craddock, "Isn't that great. Finally he met the gospel, broke the pattern, and he was making a new way."

That second story pretty much summarizes the gospel, indeed summarizes the life, the message, of the Apostle Paul. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me...So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" "Fred, if I was wrong about her, I was probably wrong about a lot of other stuff." Everything new! You and me...new.

Paul literally believes that he is a new man. The old has died. The old Paul simply does not exist anymore. "I have been crucified with Christ." In the words of New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, "This was

Paul's own experience. For him, Christ crucified and risen revealed the way to new life 'in Christ,' a phrase he uses over a hundred times in his letters. Here it functions as a metaphor for the path of personal transformation - dying to an old identity and way of life and rising into a new identity and way of life. It is metaphorical language for a process of radical internal change...The difference is as great as the difference between life and death...The old Paul had died; a new Paul had been born..."It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Everything new!

I've always loved one classic moment in the film, *Tender Mercies*. Robert Duvall plays Mac, a down-on-his-luck country songwriter who battles the bottle. He fights back with the help of a young widow who offers him room and board in exchange for handyman help. Along the way, Mac begins to experience something of grace, even feels the stirrings of hope. Eventually both Mac and the widow's young boy, Sonny, make the decision to be baptized. Driving home after the baptism, Sonny says to Mac, "Well, we done it, Mac, we was baptized." Peering into the truck's rearview mirror, Sonny studies himself for a moment. "Everybody said I'd feel like a changed person. Do you feel like a changed person?" "Not yet," replies Mac. "Not yet." But as the film progresses, we see he may be more changed than he wants to admit or even realizes...new creation.

Like Mac, maybe like that bitter old man who was buried crosswise, we often have trouble seeing ourselves as changed people. We might even have trouble believing it is possible to change. In fact, we may not even want to change. "I yam what I yam and that's all that I yam!"

But here is Paul saying, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." Not there will be a new creation, not there might be a new creation...no, there is a new creation, right here, right now, in you and in me. The new has come. But it is so hard to see. So little seems changed, as year after year the longed-for perfection does not appear and I struggle with the same old shortcomings, compulsions, weakness and despair. And I don't even want to get into our wider world.

But then, every once in a while, I see it, God's new creation, God's new world, shining so brightly I wonder how I missed it. Over 40 years ago, Bill Johnson, an openly gay man, was ordained to the Christian ministry by The Golden Gate Association of the Northern California Conference of the United Church of Christ, the Association of which our church is a member. The leadership of this church - the Community Church - was outraged over this. Our church's Association delegates voted against the ordination and this church almost left the denomination. It was a time of great anger and bitterness.

Three years ago, Bethany Nelson, now legally married to her partner Camie - a marriage service celebrated in this church - was ordained to the Christian ministry in this very same church, the church that had fought so hard against Bill Johnson. And when we laid hands on her precious head, people wept - men, women, young old, Democrats, Republicans - people embraced and wept. For we knew, surely the Spirit of the Lord is in this place. A new creation - right here, right now. And it continues. God has placed a new song in each of our hearts and God is determined that we will learn to sing it.

Friends, the needs of humanity are too great, the suffering and pain too extensive, the world's lures too seductive for us to begin to change the world unless we are changed. And that is exactly what God in Christ is up to. Oh, the status quo is alluring. It is in the air we breathe, the food we eat, the evening news, and in the institutions, theologies and politics of our society. But then we come here on Sunday morning, and when we are at our best, a power is let loose here. It is a power that summons each and every one of us to submit to transformation. In the presence of this power, our fingers are one by one pulled loose from their tight grip on the status quo and we are wrenched away from the world as it is into a whole new world, a world where, even now, we are being created anew.

Don Quixote was quite mad, or so they said. His view of the world was so at odds with most people's. But whose world was really most sane...most real? He met a harlot named Aldonza. He re-named her the lady Dulcinea. He believed in her, he loved her purely from afar. She too thought him quite mad and tried again and again to set him straight, sometimes quite cruelly.

You know the story - to dream the impossible dream. On his deathbed, Don Quixote's friends have forced him to their definition of a saner view of things. She comes to see him one more time, but he does not recognize her. But by now she has known the transforming, healing power of his acceptance and love, has been caught by the wonderful power of his caring. Something old has died; something new has been born. She says to him, 'Don't you remember me? You gave me a new name. You called me Dulcinea.' And, for a brief moment, he sees her and understands and whispers, "My Lady."

And the former Aldonza says, "My name is Dulcinea." Call it what you will...transformation, new life, a whole new creation. It's what happens when we know and accept and welcome into our hearts the love of God in Jesus Christ.