

“Wisdom!”

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

Lent 4/C, March 30, 2025

Christians might argue that a source of the world’s hatred and violence today is our failure to view people the way God views us. Countries wage wars and people launch verbal grenades at each other in part because we believe that our enemies are something other than beloved image-bearers of the living God.

Many people claim to desire a more civil society in which all persons are respected. We say we want to work together for “the common good” and then fail to agree on what that means. However, as we hear the story of the early church in Corinth, Paul and Timothy remind us that they ground their call not in what the world expects but rather in God’s character and work. They teach the church that we are not to view others from a worldly perspective, but as those whom God has created and loves without exception.

We often look back on our lives and consider the pivotal moments when things changed in some way. Those events can be joyful or tragic but through them we often reminisce about what happened before and after that event. Paul considered what his life was like before his conversion and after his conversion. In his “after” life he was an entirely new person so much so that he received a new name and an entirely new calling. Christ’s early disciple understood what life was like before Jesus’ death and resurrection and after.

Paul continues to write to the church of Corinth who are struggling to establish the Christian community and live in the ways of Christ. For Paul, living in community is different than it was before Christ, because he sees Christ’s death as a transformative event for every aspect of life. It is the most significant of all before and after experiences because it has transformed everyone and everything (Romans 8). In the wake of Christ’s death, we now look at others through the lens of Christ’s sacrificial love. We no longer evaluate their worthiness, their choices, or their resumes, because the love of Christ has transformed our hearts and all that we see along with it.

Paul uses the language of “new creation” as a way to capture that transformation. He wants to help the people of Corinth understand that after what Christ did there is a new way of existing in the world. And all of this is only possible because of God, and because our relationship with God was changed by Christ (and by nothing we could have done). This is the meaning of reconciliation, to have a relationship restored. Paul also hopes to have his relationship with the Corinthians restored. Reconciliation is initiated by God and has been completed as far as God is concerned, and yet Paul reminds us that we have to keep practicing reconciliation within ourselves and with others.

How does being a new creation, formed through the love of Christ, change the way we see and interact with the world? How does this love transform the way that we live in community? There are moments in our lives that change who we are, how we interact with others, events that we reference by noting what our lives were like before and after.

Kate Bowler reflects on these kinds of events that change who we are. She writes, “That was then. This is now. In between these two plain-spoken phrases lies the event that changed everything. Because the collision of forces (many beyond our control) has cranked up the heat until all is molten metal. We’ve lost our bearings. Our lives have come undone. In the after, our lives take on a new shape as we respond to the set reality that is upon us. In the spiritual life, such times are called a crucible, which is the actual real-life container in a foundry into which liquid metal is poured. What shape will emerge? A miniature John Deere made of cast iron? Gold purified ten times over (Psalm 12:6)? In the world of before and afters, sometimes before was better. Sometimes worse. But one thing that is for sure,” she says, “we can never go back, [and] afters can last forever. We can never unknow or unsee. And the most significant of all before and after experiences we can have is that one that leads us to see God’s love for us, a love that changes everything.”

In her podcast *Everything Happens*, Kate Bowler talks with Rabbi Steve Leder about the impact of before and after experiences in our lives. Rabbi Leder shares a story about his father’s death when he was 58 years old. He had been a rabbi for more than 30 years and officiated at hundreds of funerals for families. However, when it came to his father’s death, he did not experience this as a rabbi but as a son. He remembers his family being brought into the sanctuary to view his father’s casket, and how, for him, this moment changed him. He touched his father’s chest lovingly, saw himself in his father, imagined his son having this same experience when he passed and poignantly realized, “I am going to die.”

His story hit me where I live, as the saying goes. I remember when my dad died 9 years ago. My siblings turned to me to provide spiritual and emotional support in the absence of a minister who would have guided us through that process. In that instance, I responded more as a pastor than a daughter. When my mother died a couple of years ago, my experience was much different. As we prepared for her funeral, the priest supported all of us in our grief and I was able to mourn that loss of my last surviving parent, as her daughter. Losing a loved one, especially the loss of one’s mother, is certainly one of those significant before and after moments in one’s life.

Rabbi Leder talks about we recognize the moment we become adults. For some people that happens much earlier than for others. It has little to do with chronological age and more about experiences that help us to mature, to assume roles and responsibilities for which we might not yet be prepared. Rabbi Leder names the death of his father as such a moment. He suspects Kate Bowler had such an experience when she faced her cancer diagnosis in her early 30’s. There are moments in our lives that change the way we see the world, that we preface by saying before...

and after, fill in the blank, whenever we describe this event. When have you experienced those moments in your life?

Great love and great suffering are both teachers that do not let you go back to the innocence of “before.” Bowler wisely professes that there are things we just can’t unknow. Jesus made the choice to live, suffer, die, and to come back to this world, and Jesus did this out of love for us. As we live through these transitional and transformative moments, we gain hard wisdom. Rabbi Leder poignantly asks, reflecting on a death, or critical diagnosis, or trauma we’ve lived through, “was it worth it?” We would likely answer no. We would not invite such things to happen even if the wisdom we gain is indispensable. He then asks, “Was it worthless?” The answer again is no. He wisely advises, “if you are going to go through hell, don’t come out empty handed.” Another bit of hard wisdom.

Beloved, this is what Paul is describing today in our text. He wants us to remember that we are pursued by the love of God and as we turn to embrace Jesus, our lives are never the same. At least that is what we hope. Frankly this is why Paul is writing to the Corinthians. When we profess our allegiance to Christ, we are different from those who, as Paul says, are in the world. This becomes a new life not because of some quid pro quo arrangement with God where we are made whole and are saved so therefore, we have to act in a certain way to continue being loved; on the contrary, our lives are so radically different because in this turning we now live full of divine peace and joy.

As we embrace Christ, our lives change in at least three ways. First, the way we see the world, others, God, and issues of injustice changes. Secondly, our language and the way we speak of God, of others, of the world, and its injustices shifts. Finally, our community changes because the virtues our old networks and groups value do not fulfill the same type of values our Christ-infused life embraces. Get embraced by Jesus and the way you see, the way you speak, and the people you hang out with change.

I wonder, as we consider our own discipleship, do we see others from a worldly point of view or as beloved God bearers worthy of our love, mercy, respect and understanding? Does the way I live tell others that I am, in fact, a brand-new creation, whose life reflects the healing love of Christ? It is so easy for us to become sloppy or complacent in our discipleship. We allow the world to define our priorities, what we care about, who we stand with and stand up for. Can the people we encounter around the kitchen table, the board room table, the check-out line, or in the classroom even tell we are different? Have we been transformed so the way we speak about others, social issues, politics, or justice changes?

Christ reconciled us to God and through this reconciliation we are now a new creation compelled to share that same unmerited love of God we’ve received. We become agents of Christ’s love and mercy. In fact Paul calls us ambassadors of Christ in the world. If love is the highest spiritual gift we are given, we then share that love through the ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation

literally means ensuring that the books are in order, where all the debits and credits line up evenly. Balance is restored, not only in the accounting ledgers but more importantly in our relationship with God and those around us.

Reconciliation is not something we can demand. Reconciliation restores balance with those we know and those whom we don't know, with individuals and communities. It restores balance with people we like or may not like very much. All have been created in the image of God and through the ministry of reconciliation may like us, become a new creation. The opportunity for reconciliation is always there, however, like most interactions that involve human beings, both parties have to assent for it to happen.

Being a new creation, formed through the love of Christ, changes the way we see and interact with the world. As we are reconciled to Christ and to one another we are made new, filled with the power and possibility to transform the world. Christ's life, death and resurrection changes everything. For followers of Jesus, it is the ultimate before and after event. In the wake of the resurrection, may we take up the mantle as ambassadors of the Risen Christ ready to meet one another with the love and kindness and mercy with which Christ has met us. May it be so. Amen