

A New Creation
2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Reformation Sunday/ 27th October 2019

“For the love of Christ urges us on...” (2 Cor. 5:14). Forward. Never back. Christ is always out ahead of us. He goes before us. His love summons us, entices us, pulls and leads us ever deeper into something new. Didn’t he tell his disciples, “...after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee” (Mt. 26:32)? And didn’t the angel say to terrified women at the tomb, the first witnesses to resurrection, “Do not be afraid; ...he has been raised from the dead...he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him” (Mt. 28:5, 7). For the love of Christ urges us on.

This text from 2 Corinthians might seem like an odd text for Reformation Sunday and for this service giving thanks for twenty years of ministry together. On Reformation Sundays we often look back to the needed reforms of the church in the sixteenth century. We celebrate Martin Luther (1483-1546), sing “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” You know how much I love this Sunday. Twice I have been in Zürich on Reformation Sunday and went to worship—once in Zwingli’s (1484-1531) church, the Grossmünster—and boldly sang Luther’s hymn, in German: “*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*”! It was marvelous surrounded by all those voices. This weekend marks the start of a year-long commemoration of the 500th anniversary of reform in Zürich. We remember John Calvin (1509-1465) in Geneva, John Knox (1513-1572) in Edinburgh. But the Reformation also had a shadow side. The reformers did some really terrible things. Just ask the Anabaptists—actually, you can ask my friend Christy Waltersdorff, here with us today, a pastor in the Church of the Brethren, and she can tell you. She often reminds me how terrible the reformers were to them. The Reformation split the church and it continues to split and divide and tear asunder the body of Christ. So, we have to be careful about sugarcoating the past.

I’m talking to myself here, as I can sometimes get lost in the past. I love history, as you know. I can get nostalgic. Anticipating today’s service, the past couple of weeks have been emotional for me. I’m grateful for the work we have done together these twenty years, for the growth, the challenges, the opportunities, the laughter, and some of the more zany things we experienced together. We lived through not one, but two capital campaigns, and renovated this building. But more significantly, we helped build lives, cared for one another, helped, supported, and tried to loved one another in the reconciling love of God. I look back at all the baptisms, watching children grow and develop and venture forth from these walls out into the world to serve. I think of the weddings. And I think of the funerals, the people we said good-bye to. I pulled out the bulletin from my installation service in 1999, and was struck by the people no longer with us: John Schwartz (who chaired the pastoral nominating committee), Ed Roberts, Cherry Marshall, Lawson Brown. We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). As many ministers here know, it is truly a profound privilege to be a servant of the Word, to be an ambassador for Christ (however inadequate), pastor, preacher, teacher, counselor, engaging in this “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). I look back, remember, and give thanks to God for God’s grace and for the grace and acceptance of this congregation, which I have felt and known. I stand here feeling blessed and grateful.

Still—still “the love of Christ urges us on.” We can’t stay where we are. We can’t go back. We move, into the future, ahead of us—that’s where we meet Christ. As I said to myself countless times walking on the Camino across Spain, and as others countless times said to me when I was tired, “*Ultreia*.” An old Basque word, *ultreia* means, “Onward.” “Forward.” “Further.” “Keep going.” One more step, pilgrim, one more step. George Macleod (1895-1991), the founder of the Iona Community in Scotland, often said that a Christian is always leaning into the future. We lean into the future with confidence and hope because the love of Christ urges us on.

And because, as Paul knew, *personally*, all around us in the world and within us, right to the very core of our psyches, there is a *new creation*—something has happened and is happening! I don’t fully understand, but I know it’s true. When I was in college, I read though the sermons of theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965). Immersed in those sublime sermons, I first sensed the call to preach. My own religious experiences resonated with what he was pointing toward, and I knew that I had to be faithful to what I had discovered. In one sermon, in particular, I was struck by something he said and thought, “*This. This* is it.” These words continue to reverberate in my life: “We want only to communicate to you an experience we have had that here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation, usually hidden, but sometimes manifest, and certainly manifest in Jesus, who is called the Christ.”¹

What is this new creation? It’s grace and joy and hope; it’s forgiveness and reconciliation, personal transformation, the transfiguration of reality; it’s justice and wholeness and restoration; it’s the font of new beginnings, new life where death once reigned— it’s resurrection. And it’s real and it’s happening. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17). “A new creation,” Paul said, “is everything” (Gal 6:15)! And the new creation is not a static creation, but more like “a creating, a *creatio continua*, continually happening in each existential moment.”²

Christ is making all things new! This new thing is genuinely new, unprecedented, unexpected, unanticipated by either the past or the present. And, thus, God is continually holding out an entirely different future for us, not by renegotiating our relationship to the past but by doing something entirely, radically new. The love of Christ is establishing a new order, not taking us back to a glorified or imagined past, but some place new. Sure, friends, history is great, but it can’t save us. History is not redemptive. For the person of faith, history is never, ever destiny. And nostalgia has no place here, whatsoever. We’re not called to go back to Eden, but forward into the new creation that God is bringing about—in you and me. Remember, God placed an angel with a flaming sword to the east end of Eden to make sure we never return. We can’t go back (Genesis 3:24). For the new creation is changing the direction and meaning and purpose of our lives. And because it is grace it’s transforming our lives, granting a new future that is not the product or result of the past. It is sheer gift, radically new.

The love of Christ is urging us into the new creation. The love of Christ is urging the church into the new creation. The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1875-1961) once said, “The advocates of Christianity squander their energies in the mere preservation of what had come down to them, with no thought of building on their house and making it roomier.”³

Can you imagine the church creating new rooms, becoming more spacious, expansive, something new? Not static, not a museum, not a historical preservation society, but continually participating in that new thing God is doing in the world, creating space for us to live into the new thing God is doing for the world through us. Formed and reformed and always reforming by the Word, energized by the Holy Spirit, we're sent out to bear witness to the new creation.⁴

“For the love of Christ urges us on...” Forward. Always out ahead of us. His love summoning us. Enticing us. Inviting us, pulling us and leading us ever deeper into the new creation.

This is our work.

This is our task.

This is our vocation.

¹ From Paul Tillich's sermon "The New Being," in the collection of sermons *The New Being* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 18.

² David Congdon, *The God Who Saves: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), 227

³ C. G. Jung, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self, Collected Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 9, ii, par. 170.

⁴ This is an allusion to the quotes from the worship bulletin for this Sunday: *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbi Dei* (The church reformed, and always reforming according to the Word of God) – a motto of the Reformation. And, "Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), III.2.33