

LIVING IN THE NEW CREATION

2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Jeremiah 31:31-34

A while back I heard an American mission worker in Egypt tell about one of his former students. This missionary, who was supported by the church where I was pastor, works at a seminary in Cairo where he prepares pastors to serve in the Protestant Church of Egypt. If you follow the news, you've heard about the tensions that are roiling the Middle East. You've heard about the rise of Islamist militants, and the growing isolation of Christians. One night this pastor's church was burned to the ground when some people broke in and lit it from top to bottom. But rather than seek revenge, rather than rally his people to go burn down a mosque, the next Sunday this pastor, who was trained with the help of mission support from churches like IPC, told his congregation when they gathered next to the ruins of their church, "It's not our business to worry about revenge. Our business is to listen to what God is doing now. This event will make us better Christians." This man knew that God was doing something different. God saw their tragedy with different eyes. He was reminding his church what Paul reminded the church in Corinth: Christ died for all. "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view." Because of the cross, we see things differently.

If Jesus had been keeping score, he would have had plenty of reasons to use the power of Almighty God to get even. He began his life as a refugee in Egypt, fleeing with Mary and Joseph from the murderous King Herod. After he started his public ministry, his first sermon was in Nazareth, the town where he grew up, and the people tried to throw him off a cliff. One of his disciples, those men whom he loved and entrusted with his work, one of them handed him over to be executed. When the Roman governor Pontius Pilate asked the crowd to choose either Jesus or the insurrectionist murderer Barabbas to be crucified, they chose Jesus. Jesus could have gotten on the wave to "Make Israel Great Again," but that's not how Jesus works. When he was arrested in

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the Garden of Gethsemane, one of his disciples pulled out a sword and cut off the ear of one of those who had come out to arrest Jesus. Jesus rebuked him and told him to put away his weapon. "I could call down angels from heaven," he said, but that's not what he was about. Instead of getting even and setting things right with an apocalyptic blow, Jesus went to the cross where he took on all the sins of the world, all of the abuses and injustices he suffered, and all the failures, sins and transgressions of you, me and every broken, corrupt, disordered relationship in the world, and he said, "We're going to start over. You're forgiven. From now on, we start fresh."

As you grow up, you learn that you have to choose how you're going to relate to people. Sometimes you have to make a choice about which is more important, what they've done or the relationship you've built. My father in law was an attorney who did lots work with wills and estates. In that capacity, he was also something of a family counselor. He never betrayed confidences, but he had some horror stories about settling estates. A client's survivors would get belligerent over who got what after a parent died. Brothers and sisters would go for years without speaking to each other because they felt they had been wronged in the settlement of a loved one's affairs. That's why my mother in law made it clear to her three children that whenever they divided up her effects, their first priority was to be maintaining family unity. And that's what they did. They set up a very equitable system for dividing up her things, but each one had to swallow hard when another laid claim to something they'd had their eye on. I have to admit that even today when I visit my brother in law I'll see something from the old home place and think, "That would look so much better in my house." But the siblings put their relationship with each other above their desire for certain things, and I'd much rather have my family

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in my house for Thanksgiving without that coveted item than have the item and not the family.

It's the same with the way we're treated. All of us can collect affronts if we put our minds to it. Sometimes you have to decide which is more important, a relationship or an affront. Jesus showed us his choice on the cross. We've all let God down. And on the cross Jesus wipes it all clean and starts from scratch.

Now, that doesn't mean that we sweep things under the rug, that we don't hold each other accountable. When we hurt someone, if the relationship is going to survive, we have to confess what we've done and ask forgiveness and try to do better. Every Sunday when we start our worship service, we confess our sin. The very first requirement for being a Christian is to admit that we've offended God and to ask forgiveness. That was the beauty of the truth and reconciliation commissions in South Africa. After apartheid, lingering grievances could have torn that country apart. For generations, people of color had been oppressed by the white minority. But after that system of legalized segregation and discrimination ended, leaders like Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu pushed to have forums set up where those who had been harmed could confront their abusers. The victims told their abusers about the pain and suffering they had endured at their hands and how it had affected their lives. The offenders had to listen and confront the result of their actions. Then they could ask their victims for forgiveness, and the commission could prescribe reparations or rehabilitation or amnesty. The purpose of the commissions was to take seriously the wrongs that had been done, but to put the reconciliation and the future of the country before retribution that focused on the past.

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That's how God relates to us through Christ. God doesn't ignore the past, but puts it right on the cross and starts over. And that's how we, as Christ's ambassadors, relate to others. In Christ we are a new creation: everything old has passed away; everything has become new! That doesn't mean that we ignore reality. We don't sugar coat other people or turn a blind eye to them. We see them with new eyes. It doesn't mean that you loan money to someone you know has bad credit and doesn't have the discipline to pay you back. It doesn't mean you invite your friend who is in recovery out for a round of drinks. It doesn't mean letting criminals walk the streets without paying the consequences for their crimes. It doesn't mean that those who have hurt us don't have to do something to regain our trust.

There are some relationships that can't be repaired, and in that case, reconciliation might mean going your separate ways to keep from hurting each other. Often that's the best outcome of a divorce. There are times when two people who made a commitment to spend their lives together realize that they just can't stay together, for whatever reason. Sometimes that means they redefine the relationship and stay involved in each other's lives, but in a different way. And sometimes it might mean breaking contact altogether so they aren't caught in a struggle for mutually assured destruction. They realize the harmful buttons they push in each other, so they walk away in order that their lives can move beyond bitterness and revenge.

John 3:16 says that God so loved the world that he gave his only son. Theologians can debate who has access to eternal life and how, but one thing that is indisputable is that God loves the world and Christ died for all, whether we believe and accept that gift or not. When we give our lives to Christ, our eyes are opened to see the world as he sees it, in love. We know that every person we encounter is a person for whom he died. Whether that person is

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sitting on death row or on the papal throne, whether someone lives in a council house or the White House, whether that person is your best friend or your worst enemy, Christ died for her or for him. And so that is how we treat everyone, whether we like them or not. We treat every person with the kind of dignity and respect and love they deserve, not for what they've done, but because Jesus went to the cross for them.

Seeing everyone that way can come in handy when you're about to blow your top in a crowded airport and your trip is falling apart. All those people who are jostling you in the endless security line – Jesus loves each one of them. That harried agent who is trying desperately to rebook you and getting pretty testy about it – Jesus loves her. Sometimes, when you're in a situation where the worst of human nature is on display, it helps to say a little prayer, "Lord, help me be an ambassador for you. Help me be a little spot of your love."

Not long ago my wife and I were having supper with the retired CEO of a major international corporation. He's an elder in his church, and we were talking about how he dealt with people running such a complex organization. The topic got around to how he dealt with subordinates who weren't working out. He didn't shout, "You're fired!" and boot them without ever giving it a second thought. If the issue was poor performance, he'd do what he could to help that person find the calling that was right for him or her. That might involve help finding another job or retooling for a different career. If some kind of malfeasance was involved and there did have to be a quick and clean termination, he would always treat that person with respect and remember them in his prayers. He told of several people he'd let go who later came by to see him. When his assistant announced that they were waiting to see him, he got a little nervous, but they'd come in and thank him for helping them find the place they were supposed to be. One said, "I don't know how I ever got

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involved in that job I had with you. In retrospect I hated it. But I love what I'm doing now. Thank you for helping me see that."

That's the kind of thing that can happen when we realize that because of Christ we're a new creation. We see others differently, as he sees them. And seeing others as Christ sees them, we can join him in building up that new creation, in living out of love and respect and kindness. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." That's who we are, his new creation. Live it!