

“Living a Cross-Shaped Life”

One of my favorite stories is the one of the old guy in the backwoods of Kentucky who could be counted on to show up at every revival meeting in town. At the end of each service when the invitation was given, he would come down the aisle, get down on his knees, raise his arms to Heaven and shout, “Fill me Jesus, fill me Jesus!” Then, within a matter of weeks, he would slip back into his old ways of living. But the next time a revival came around, we would be right back, down on his knees, praying the same prayer. One time, he was down on his knees yelling to the ceiling, “Fill me Jesus. Fill me Jesus” when suddenly from the back of the church some lady yelled, “Don’t do it Lord! He leaks!”

Well the truth is that all of us leak at one time or another. That is why we need to hear these words that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. And what a hopeful message for us all. That *when* we are in Christ, we are new creations. And as newly created children of God, we are called to focus on God and filter all aspects of our living through *his* grace and love.

This is a very timely message for us to consider during the Lenten season because Lent is a time for penance by all Christians. It is a time to confront our own mortality and confess our sins before God within a community of faith. It is a time to turn over our weaknesses to God and let Him turn them into strengths. It is a time for second chances, if you will, a time to *become* that new creation as we journey with Jesus toward the cross.

Reading these words and thinking about being a new creation reminded me of a question that someone asked once when I was visiting my Sunday School class at my

home church. The teacher asked us what it means to live a cross-shaped life. And after she said it, her question hung around in the front of my brain like a child nagging her mom in the grocery store for a cookie. Finally, I came to realize that the only way I could get the question to STOP nagging me was to try to answer it. What DOES it mean for us as new creations of Christ to live a cross-shaped life? Or maybe I should change the question to AM I LIVING A CROSS-SHAPED LIFE? Perhaps examining whether or not our lives are cross-shaped will prepare us to focus, not only on our individual lives during Lent, but on the work that God calls us as the body of Christ to do in His kingdom.

In this passage, Paul begins by reminding us WHO is called to live a cross-shaped life and he does this with just one little word – anyone. He says, “so if ANYONE is in Christ there is a new creation.” In my Bible, I have written in the margin next to this passage, “I have Christ’s potential.” But when I thought about trying to live a cross-shaped life, I realized how egotistical that thought is. Paul is not just talking about me! He says ANYONE has Christ’s potential. So what all this boils down to is that living a cross-shaped life means realizing that we cannot look at others the way we used to. Instead, we must see them also as ones who have a new potential.

Now believing that "anyone" in Christ is a new creation is a beautiful statement when you consider that this sanctuary is full of "anyones". So Paul's words are a gift because all of us have certainly told at least a little white lie, if not just a blatant big one. All of us have misused the name of our God or not honored our parents, if not in our actions then probably in our thinking. All of us have listened to the world instead of the WORD. I could go on with a laundry list of our sinfulness but I think you get the point.

What a word of comfort to think that each and every "anyone" sitting here became new with Christ's resurrection.

But as comforting as this is, when anyone really becomes ANYONE, for example Hitler, or ISIS or child abusers or young people who shoot other young people in schools then this sentence almost becomes impossible to preach! (1)

Unless we are willing to live cross-shaped lives. Because the shape of the cross is, in a word, GRACE. Friends, when our lives are cross-shaped, then we can truly see the world with the eyes that God sees the world with. And we understand that we cannot give up the hope that God's grace can redeem a Hitler without giving up the hope that God's grace can redeem each one here.

Remember, Paul says that God made Jesus to be SIN – that is collective sin – the state of our human condition. So even when we want to rank sin in our human judgment, the Scripture makes it clear that ANYONE's sins are alike. All sin separates us from God in the same way. Or better said, it seems as if the cross puts us on a level playing ground in our sinfulness AND in our redemption.

There is a beautiful prayer that Mother Theresa once wrote that says, "Dearest Lord, may I see you today and every day in the person of your sick, and while nursing them minister unto you. Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguise of the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable, may I still recognize you and say, 'Jesus, my patient, how sweet it is to serve you'." What a gift to be able to see not only Christ's potential in every person we meet, but to be reminded of the power of God's redemption as well.

But perhaps the key idea in this challenging passage is to remember that God has not reconciled himself to the world but the world to himself. God, who is faithful and just, does not need to be changed. And because God is beyond the need for revision, God can change each sin-wrecked soul by means of Christ's atoning death.

Paul knew this better than anyone. God changed Paul from a persecutor of Christians to a follower whose cross-shaped life led him to sing to the glory of God when he sat in a jail cell because of his belief in the risen Christ.

Finally, Paul's promise reminds us that it is not enough to realize that we are new creations. Now we must live like we are! I once read somewhere that you have not really learned a commandment until you have obeyed it. And this is probably the hardest part of living a cross-shaped life.

But when you think about it, obedience is what leads us to freedom. I think that that is why the Psalmist wrote that those who meditate on the Law of the Lord are like trees planted by the streams of water, yielding fruit in its season. Obedience is what leads us to the righteousness that God calls us to demonstrate in our living and frees us from having to choose anything else.

However, I will tell you honestly that the first thing that came to my mind when I heard the suggestion to think about the shape of my living was a conversation that I had once with a friend. This particular friend used to be a nun. Now she is not. I finally got up my nerve one day to ask her why she quit being a nun. She said that, after a while, she began to realize that she was only living out the *vertical* part of the cross. That she had plenty of communion with God and spent much of her time with Him. But there came a

day when she realized that that God was calling her to live out the *horizontal* part of the cross and share his love and grace with others.

Her words articulate beautifully what I am trying to express. Paul calls us to be ambassadors for Christ. This means that we must spend time focusing on God, listening to God, dwelling in God's word as we live out the vertical part of the cross. And then we will be able to spread His love along the horizontal part of the cross as we focus on others in His kingdom. And as God's ambassadors we will be the voice and actions of God, showing others what the kingdom of God can look like.

I had the privilege of leading a women's retreat last weekend where one of the participants told this story by Christian author Tracie Miles. Tracie and her family had just received devastating news about her sister following some surgery. She said, "You could have heard a pin drop as we all sat there with eyes filled with tears and hearts filled with worry. But the silence came to an abrupt halt as another family entered the room with a lot of hustle and bustle.

I immersed myself in my own feelings and tried to tune them out until I heard the Name of Jesus filling the room. In that moment, when fear and anxiety hovered, just the mention of Jesus' Name was music to my ears. I lifted my head to see a beautiful white-haired woman, with sparkling eyes and an engaging smile. She sat in a wheelchair, telling her family how she was praying that the Lord would heal her precious husband. Despite her grim situation, her face was glowing with joy.

I quickly averted my eyes, but within seconds she was staring at me and hollered, "Hey honey! How are you?" I managed a pitiful smile, said "Fine, thank you," and intended to keep to myself. She, however, had other plans. Before I knew it, she had

rolled her wheelchair across the room and stopped right at my feet. She talked about her family, why her husband was in surgery, and what a wonderful godly man he was. She asked about our situation and began encouraging me with God's promises.

Although at first I wished she would stop talking, I soon found myself wanting to write down her every word as she poured out her sweetness all over me. Then she said something I will never forget. "Honey, I hope God blesses your sister. If He can only save one person today, I hope it is her. My husband is 85 years-old and has lived a long and fruitful life."

I was literally stunned by her selflessness. I was shocked that she would even consider the thought of putting a total stranger's life ahead of the life of her dear husband. I didn't know how to respond to such a sacrificial, heartfelt, godly expression of love. Then she took my hands into hers and prayed for my sister out loud. Afterwards, I prayed for her husband, and she disappeared as quickly as she had appeared. I walked out of that waiting room having seen a glimpse of Jesus in the face of a frail, elderly woman, a woman who was willing to be the hands and feet of Christ."

So each time one of us has the chance to share the grace-filled, cross-shaped lives that are ours, we also have the chance to be ambassadors for Christ and help the new creation of God continue to grow. As we journey through the season of Lent, may we strengthen the vertical part of our cross-shaped living by prayer and communion with our Lord. Then let us remember that only when we live like the new creations that we are, in obedience to God and loving service to others, will the cross be complete in the shape of our lives. Amen.

Notes

- (1) Casey Thompson, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, pages 110-114