

The Apostle Paul and a Vision of the New Creation
2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2
December 22, 2013

Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you stand near the center of the Sistine Chapel and look up, you can see it. The creation of Adam. You probably know the picture. Two hands reaching out toward each other. You can find reproductions of it on coffee cups, greeting cards, umbrellas, even neckties.

The tension that picture creates lies in that small empty space between two fingers, the finger of Adam and the finger of God. They are about to touch. Heaven and earth, divinity and humanity, eternity and time are about to collide.

On the ground, we have Adam, hand outstretched awaiting a touch from his Creator. In the clouds, we have God, surrounded by angels. His garments are furled. There in his arm is the figure of Eve, a future gift for Adam. Present life and future gifts are suspended there in time as the figure of God reaches toward Adam. And in that moment, as hand reaches out to hand, with the smallest of gaps between the two fingers, we foresee God's creative work.

You can stand there, for what seems like an eternity, looking up and waiting for that moment to occur. Of course, waiting like that, with your head tilted back as you look at the ceiling, will cause your neck to ache. But it's better than looking away, because when you turn your eyes away from the ceiling and look out at the world, you feel an ache in your heart.

Look at the world around you and you will see a much larger gap between heaven and earth, between humans and God. This gap occurred after creation. It began with the first sin, and has been growing ever since. Everywhere you look you can see evidence

of it. A casual glance at any newspaper will tell you how far humans have fallen from the touch of God. And it makes your heart hurt.

There's the way wealth fuels class warfare, as some feast on exotic dishes on Caribbean cruises while others, in the hills of Appalachia, can't afford food. High schools are war zones as gym bags carry bombs. Highways are unsafe as angry drivers engage in road rage. Sexual deviance, hate crimes, the papers are filled with the stories of sin.

It makes your head spin and your heart ache. People aren't resting peacefully on earth like Adam awaiting God's work. Quite to the contrary, the world is a whirl of activity and most of the actions demonstrate how far we have fallen from the touch of God.

But if you close your eyes and listen, you can hear it. A voice from the edge. A voice calling out to us, across centuries, asking us to stop, to see, and to trust in something wonderful.

"Behold, now is the favorable time."

This time of this world with its sin and destruction?

Yes. "Behold now is the day of salvation."

Today, in this place, where these people have gathered?

Yes. "Behold, now is the favorable time – now is the day of salvation."

Paul's words encourage us. He helps our hearts hope more and hurt less as we prepare to celebrate the coming of our Savior into the world.

Yet how can Paul do that? Think about his situation. Paul faced a crisis in Corinth. You might call it a ministry mess. Paul wasn't new to the church in Corinth. Paul had been a missionary there. He had stayed with the Corinthians, preaching in their homes, for over a year (Acts 18:1-11).

He had counseled them in their use of spiritual gifts. He had taught them about the Lord's Supper. He had been there, preaching, teaching, and encouraging the faithful in this large metropolitan city. But now, there was a mess. A ministry mess that had the Corinthians asking, "Why should we listen to Paul?" Paul had become a voice, just a voice from the edge. A group of false teachers had come into Corinth. They were amazing. Absolutely amazing.

If you wanted a preacher who could make your heart sing with his eloquence, these false teachers had it. They were masters of rhetoric (2 Cor. 11:5-6). If you wanted a preacher who could hold up his credentials, references from other people claiming he was sent from God, these preachers had it. If you wanted a preacher who could tell you stories of amazing events, these preachers had it. They claimed visions and revelations and spoke with a personal authority (2 Cor. 11:13-15 and 12:1) that made you – well, it made you doubt the apostle Paul and the God Paul preached.

That's what is so amazing about this letter. With all of his years of service in the church, with all of the ties and connections he had to this congregation, with all that he could have turned to for hope in this hurtful situation – Paul turns to God.

What does Paul say? “*Christ's love compels us.*” Christ's love. Not Paul's love. Not Paul's vision. Not Paul's leadership. Not Paul's power. But Christ's love. A love that gives everything, bears everything, loses everything so everyone might be forgiven and made a new creation by God.

The moment of creation captured on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel focuses on a gap, a space between the finger of Adam and the finger of God. Paul, however, doesn't focus on a gap but on a connection: the day when God became man. That day, when the hand of a human was the hand of God.

Paul writes: *God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ* (v. 19). God the Father sent Jesus into this world on a mission. God did not simply stand outside of our world, looking down on us from some heavenly realm, waiting for us to stop sinning and come back to him. God came into our world to seek us and find us. This is what we are preparing to celebrate: Christmas.

Jesus took on our human flesh. He became man and called us back to God. His work, however, involved more than simply announcing the kingdom of God, as if that's all that is needed. Instead, he actually opened the way. Paul writes: *God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God* (v. 21).

The hand of Jesus is the hand of God, touching our sin, being nailed with it and being nailed by it to a tree. Christ took upon himself the wrath of God. He bore the eternal punishment of our rebellion and, through that act, opened for us the heart of his Father. Jesus then rose from the grave and opened for us the hope of a new creation.

We now experience the eternal love of God, our Father. A love that will not abandon his children or hold their sins against them (v. 19), but works in their lives and brings about his new creation.

And that is what Paul, a voice from the edge, wants the church to remember. Not just the church in Corinth – but this church – our church – today. Left to ourselves, looking at our world, looking at our lives, our heart will hurt. But Paul redirects our attention to God. Not on some ceiling far away, but here in our presence. God comes today in an act of reconciliation. He comes to us in his word. He comes to us in his body and blood at this altar.

Relentlessly. Lovingly. Tirelessly. God reaches out his hand to touch you and bring about his new creation. Unlike God's hand on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, this hand is wounded and its wounds are precious. All of your sin and your suffering, your harmful actions, your hopelessness, your despair, these are taken into the wounded hands of God as he comes and touches you, bringing about his new creation. *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, behold, the new has come* (v. 17). And when you

see God's new creation, your heart fills with hope.

Whatever mess your life might be in, you have hope in the hand that holds you. No wonder Paul points to this working of God. On the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, you have the act of God's first creation. It is breathtaking and beautiful and larger than life. But, for many, it is something that they will never see in their lifetime. It's too far away. However, in our text from Corinthians, you can see God's new creation.

It's not far away. It's very near. It's simple and profound and happens in the most ordinary of circumstances. God's hand reaches into this world, with its conflict and suffering and brings about hope. And as you enter the world with all of its hurt, God has given you a message of hope. God can take your voice – and make it, like Paul's, a voice from the edge that shares his gracious work.

Today, Paul calls us to stop and to open our eyes: see the wonder of God's new creation. There, in Corinth, here, in this sanctuary, and out there in the world. Look and see. God is bringing about a new creation. With hearts that hope more and ache less, God gives us a glimpse of the eternal kingdom to come.