

The First Day of the Rest of Your Life

Text: II Corinthians 5: 17; 6: 2

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old order has gone, and a new order has already begun. II Corinthians 5: 17

...The day of Salvation has dawned. II Corinthians 6: 2

May I teach you a rather difficult word, which for most of you would not be part of your ordinary conversation?

It is *ontology*. It is the science of Being. It is a branch of Philosophy, which studies the essence of being or the structure of Reality. It derives from the Greek word for "being," *ousia*. Ontology refers to what is: the structure of Reality, the way things are.

Now, what has Ontology to do with the Gospel of Eastertide? Very much, indeed.

Easter changed the Ontological structure of the Cosmos. With the Resurrection of Jesus, God created a whole new world, a new reality. The Gospel is the announcement of that new world. To "hear" the Gospel is to be introduced into a whole new Ontology. To realize this and to grasp it by faith is to experience

The First Day of the Rest of Your Life.

Paul had experienced it. Jesus revealed it to him as the Risen Lord in a vision. The whole structure of Reality was changed for Paul. In one of his letters he expressed it this way:

When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old order has gone, and a new order has already begun.

For Paul, in Jesus' death and resurrection, the day of salvation has dawned.

Let us begin by listening to what the text is teaching us about the way things really are - the reality of our world and thus the reality of our situation.

...there is a new world, the old order has gone, and a new order has already begun.

As we have moved together through Lent, Holy Week and celebrated Easter Sunday, we have been aware of two worlds, two kingdoms.

We heard Paul's story: A man of impeccable credentials, according to human standards of judgment, who says,

But all such assets I have written off because of Christ.... I count everything sheer loss, because all is far outweighed by the gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. ...all I care for is to know Christ, to experience the power of his resurrection...

Paul ranked ahead of his fellows when judged by the performance principle. But that driven, compulsive need to establish and secure himself yielded no peace. Then he met Jesus. He learned life was not an achievement to be gained, but a gift to be received. He began to live by grace. It was the first day of the rest of his life.

We have learned that grace does not free us from responsible commitment, but frees us to love as we have been loved. That is, to love unconditionally.

That is the way God loves us. He demonstrated His love to us in that while we were yet enemies Christ died for us. Thus we saw that it is out of the abyss of love that grace flows, embracing us, melting our defenses, overcoming our weakness and our fear, our hostility.

But on Palm Sunday we became very much aware that while the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of love and grace, has taken root in our old world in Jesus, yet the old world rages on refusing to let go.

Jesus enters the City defenseless and vulnerable. He is totally free of worldly entanglement because he is wholly God's man. Because he is wholly God's man, he moves into the hostile environment where death awaits him with calm assurance.

Unconditional love clashes with the established powers of this world. The High Priest announces the death sentence. Jesus is crucified. On Good Friday it would appear that the way of love is doomed to be crushed out by the way of expediency.

And then dawned the Third Day.

Easter was the first day of the rest of the world. There was an Ontological Shift on Easter. The Creator raised Jesus and created a new world. He re-created the world as far as His relationship with the human family is concerned.

The point is, something happened. On Monday morning it was not business as usual. It was an Easter world - a whole new Reality.

That is why I bother you with that strange word "Ontology." I want to stress that the world is changed; Reality is changed. The old world continues. We continue to be part of the old scene. But the old world is gone, in reality! This is an Ontological Shift, a shift of cosmic proportions.

I have become more aware of this recently. I am aware I have not proclaimed it strongly enough, confidently enough. That is why the Easter message pointed to the God Whose power effects that which is beyond all human potential. Too much of my ministry and my preaching has been within the narrowly prescribed limits of human possibility. Sometimes I think I am only beginning to glimpse the gracious power of the God of unconditional love.

We have been too much focused on the human response, not enough on the objective reality of the new creation. Listen again to the text:

There is a new world, the old has gone, and a new order has already begun.

Do we believe it? Do we live accordingly? Whether we do or not, the Truth remains. Whether we believe it and appropriate it is not the measure of its truth. Our response does not create the new reality and our lack of response does not detract from the reality. So will you hear the word of proclamation?

The day of salvation has dawned.

I was reading an Easter sermon preached by the great Karl Barth. He went regularly to the Basle prison to preach to the prisoners. He who could command any pulpit in the world chose to preach at the local jail because he said if I preach in the Cathedral, people will come to hear Karl Barth. If I preach at the jail, the prisoners will come to hear the Gospel. He preached on Jesus' words, "Because I live you, too, shall live." To these prisoners he spoke of Jesus who lived for them. In great simplicity he pointed to Jesus living for us and dying for us. And he spoke of the promise:

You will live also.

And he explained:

Yet the significant fact to remember is precisely not an obligation we are invited or urged to fulfill, so that we may, or may not, live. We are not

merely given a chance; nor is an offer made to us. "You will live also" is a promise. It is an announcement referring to the future, to our future.

"You will live also" succeeds the present of, and our presence in, the "I live" like two succeeds one, B succeeds A, the thunder succeeds the lightning ... You are a people whose future issues from my life and hence does not lie in your sin and guilt, but in true righteousness and holiness. Not in sadness, but in joy, not in captivity, but in freedom, not in death, but in life. From your present participation in my life, you may anticipate *this* and no other future. (*Deliverance to the Captives*, p. 31F)

He goes on to stress that Jesus is not only our future, but also our present.

Not the world with its accusations and we with our counter accusations. Not even the well deserved divine wrath against us, let alone our grumbling against God, or our secret thought that there might be no God after all. Therefore, not we ourselves, as we are today or think we are, make up our present. He, Jesus Christ, his life is our present: his Divine life poured out for us, and his human life, our life, lifted up in him. This is what counts. This is what is true and valid. (p. 32)

He then stresses that no one must think himself excluded, too insignificant, too sinful, too godless. And then he invites each one there present to join him at the Lord's Table. There in the Bread and Wine is the sign of what he had been saying in the message.

Jesus Christ is in our midst, he, the man in whom God himself has poured out his life for our sake and in whom our life is lifted up to God. Holy Communion is the sign that Jesus Christ is our beginning and we may rise up and walk into the future where we shall live. ... My brothers and sisters, I do not want to oppress or compel any one among you when I add: Shall we not all here present go to the Lord's Table together? Holy Communion is offered to all, as surely as the living Jesus Christ himself is for all, as surely as all of us are not divided in him, but belong together as brothers and sisters, all of us poor sinners, all of us rich through his mercy. (p. 33F)

There I see a preacher acting on the Reality of the new world which was born on Easter. We get so bogged down in checking out the human response that we lose sight of the Reality. We forget the Ontology of the New Creation.

We wonder if someone has true faith – whether his life is morally pure, whether one understands the contents of the faith. All the things that come subsequently we worry about first and instead of a grand invitation to a new Reality to which we welcome people, we erect all kinds of barriers that discourage and turn away.

Perhaps rather than keeping this Table of our Lord's here in the antiseptic atmosphere of the sanctuary, we should move it out on the highway and pass out bread and wine to those traveling past.

What would happen if, with authentic excitement in the face of the Reality Shift of Easter, we went out and shared the wonderful news of what is really true!

Something has happened. The day of Salvation has dawned.

Of course, we cannot be unconcerned with the response. The new world has dawned but it is possible to live in the death grip of the old. It is for those who are in Christ that the new world becomes reality in their experience. Therefore in our announcement of the new Reality we point to him. We must tell the story of Jesus, of his life, his death and resurrection. We must invite our neighbors to receive what has been provided and is fully offered.

And we must ask ourselves if we who believe in him have really entered into the newness that he has created.

Again I must confess that too much of my own concentration and too much of the traditional message of the Church deals with the death and resurrection of Jesus in terms of forgiveness, dealing with the past and too little emphasis is placed on the power of God to change our lives – really change our lives. Too much of my concentration and the concentration of the Church has been on getting the lost snatched from Hell fire and into the safety net of the Church. We want to get people saved!!

But what does that mean? For too many of us that has meant out of Hell and into Heaven - no matter in what state and once we get people in, we can relax a bit. Whether we consciously operate this way or not, underneath this has been a powerful motive in the Church's outreach. But it misses the whole point of what we claim to be trying to do – get people "saved." Salvation's root is the same as the root of salve. Salvation is healing. It is to bring the person toward wholeness.

God is not interested in making us pious or religious; He would make us human. That is what He created. That is the intention of recreation.

The Church Father Ireneaus understood that long ago when he wrote,

The Glory of God is a human being fully alive.

What is it, then, to be "in Christ?" - Literally it is to be lifted up to God in the Anointed One - the one anointed with Spirit, one full of God.

The context of this great text is illuminating. Paul's apostleship was under attack. He is a man sold out to Jesus Christ – making him known, announcing good news, calling all people to the new world now open to them.

We will all appear before the Judgment seat of Christ. Our lives will be laid open - an awesome thought. He senses a divine imperative to carry out his apostleship, his own life an open book. He is simply responding to what has been revealed to him. In verse 14 Paul writes:

For the love of Christ leaves us no choice, when once we have reached the conclusion that one man died for all and therefore all mankind has died. His purpose in dying for all was that men, while still in life, should cease to live for themselves, and should live for him who for their sake died and was raised to life.

The purpose of Jesus' death and resurrection is to incorporate us in him in the death to the old world and the rising to a whole new order of things. He goes on:

With us therefore worldly standards have ceased to count in our estimate of any man; even if once they counted in our understanding of Christ, they do so no longer.

Why?

The one in Christ is a new creation! The old is gone. The new has come.

Well, how does that fall out? What does that mean in the everyday affairs of an ordinary human existence? It means a new understanding - a change of mind. This is the meaning of repentance "*Metanoia*," the Greek word, points to a change of mind. Our thinking needs to be straightened out –

about God:

That we no more resist Him in our weakness and hostility, fearing He will rob us of life, but rather see Him as He is - the loving One Who comes to us in our weakness and hostility with total vulnerability in order simply to embrace us with a mercy that knows no limit, setting us free for the first time to be fully human.

about what it means to be fully human:

We see it in Jesus, totally open to the Father, totally open to the neighbor, living out the unconditional love of God in covenant human relationship.

Is not to be "in Christ" to be filled with the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God? Is it not to live in the conscious flow of God's life, His energy, His grace, seeing ourselves not as buckets to get filled but as channels to let flow through us the Divine life?

To be "in Christ" is to live consciously in the Kingdom of God, knowing one is no longer bound to live according to the Kingdom of this world. It is to be done with

the old way of doing things - the tit for tat world of vengeance, retaliation and vindictiveness. It is to be done with the world of selfish indulgence, of self-asserting, of defensiveness and the strenuous compulsion to justify oneself.

It was reported on national news last evening that a millionaire died and left her two million to a few friends and casual acquaintances. She left this word with her will. "To my children I leave nothing. I want them to receive in my death what they gave me in my life."

Think of it! Think of dying with that kind of bitterness. You say maybe the kids deserved it. Maybe they did. That that is the old world. According to the canons of the old world, God should leave us in our self-constructed hells. He could write a similar note: "I leave you in your death what you created in your life - Hell." But He showed His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

I feel sorry for the poor woman. I'm sorry her children neglected her. Perhaps she could not change them, but she could have changed her mind, her attitude. She could have let love fill her, driving out the anger and vindication. How? By looking to Jesus. By understanding God's love, by receiving it and then letting it fill her heart.

Think of standing before Jesus when one's last act was an act of retaliation and bitter resentment. Will Jesus' eyes flash with fire? No, they will be wet with tears. Will he say, "Go to Hell"? No, he will say, "My child, my child!"

And what will the dear woman respond? "They got theirs! I'm finally happy!?" No, but rather, "O my God, what have I done?"

Think of it, friend. The day of healing has dawned. This is not just Pollyanna talk. Christ is risen! There has been an ontological shift in Reality. A new world is here, the old is done away with. You don't have to live according to the canons of the old world, filled with brokenness, pain, hate, resentment.

Look to Jesus. Know that God raised him from the dead, thereby creating a whole new possibility. He died - one for all, once for all. He arose - one for all, once for all. God's Spirit filled him, the Anointed One, the Christ. Now the Risen Jesus pours out that same Spirit on all flesh - so we shall celebrate on Pentecost.

Let go. Open up; entrust your life to the Risen Lord who brings you into the presence of the Father and gives you the Spirit by which you can be freed from the old, brought into the new. Be healed by the love and grace and power of God Who needs from you simply the word -

"Come into my heart, Come into my heart, Come into my heart, Lord Jesus. Come in today, come in to stay. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus."

He will! And it will be the First Day of the Rest of Your Life! Amen.

Reference:

Karl Barth. *Deliverance to the Captives*. First published 1961.