

July 26, 2009 2 Cor. 5:11-17 “New Creation Realities” by Richard Boatman

¹¹Therefore, knowing what the fear of the Lord means [*three times in the N.T. this word is translated “terror,” 41 times “fear”*]*—that we’ll all one day stand in that place of Judgment—we endeavor to persuade all we meet to get them ready to face God, but our motives are plain to God; and I hope that in your inmost hearts they are plain to you also.* ¹²We are not again commending ourselves to you [*some contemporaries of Paul were not building the Kingdom but their own ministries and reputations*] but are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, so that you will have an answer for those who take pride in appearance and not character of the heart. ¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you. [The Knox translation renders verse thirteen: *“Are these wild words? Then take them as addressed to God. Or sober sense? Then take them as addressed to yourselves.”*]

And now we come to the real punch of today’s passage. It is marvelous when we get a glimpse of passion, of a motivation so ruled by God that it alters the human center. We speak much of love. We love this person or that person. We love Dairy Queen Blizzards or top sirloin or the Cubs or Packers...yes, even the Vikings or Steelers. But such love pales, is exposed for its limited and even trivial nature when it brushes up against the real thing. I usually buy cheap cologne. I even convince myself that it’s not that much different. But then I go with Larae to a Younkers’ store and she sprays samplers on me that go for about sixty bucks. Then I can tell the difference. Through Paul’s words we can tell the difference between a fickle love sung about in a *pop* song and a transforming love that controls and compels us to something higher, something beyond ourselves.

14 For the love of Christ controls and compels us, having concluded this that one died for all, therefore all died.

What controls your life? What compels you? What is the center around which every thing revolves? I recently heard about an organist from some Iowa church who announced to a special speaker that “this service gets out in forty-five minutes.” If it’s not over then, there would be no accompaniment for the last hymn. She leaves. Who’s in control? God’s Spirit? It sounds like the organist is.

To be controlled by Christ’s love is something incredible. We are control freaks. We don’t want to give up the spiritual “remote controls” of our lives. Look at Paul’s life. He was a *type A* got-to-control kind of guy. But something happened. He looked into the face of Christ and saw a love emanating from Calvary’s cross.

Paul's being controlled and compelled by Christ was based on a conclusion seen in the cross: "One died for all, therefore all died."

Love. I was asked in a Sunday school class: "Is hate the opposite of love?" It would seem its logical antithesis, but upon reflection I saw it differently. Hate is a perversion of love; we hate because we care or we were wronged. Hate is poison, to be sure, but I don't think it is love's opposite. I think apathy is...indifference. Remember when Jesus wanted to heal the man of his withered hand on the Sabbath? He asked the religious leaders: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save a life or to kill?" But the leaders kept silent. Their religious ritual had replaced love and they were in the throes of apathy regarding the man's plight. Jesus "look[ed] around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart" (Mark 3:1-5). Love demands commitment, consecration and compassion. Apathy knows nothing of these. "Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; love your neighbor as yourself." The great commands are so distant from apathy and indifference.

Such indifference, such spiritual mediocrity is rebuked by Jesus in Revelation: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. So because you are lukewarm...I will spit you out of My mouth" (3:15-16). Jesus can work with cold or hot because there is movement. Even an atheist who argues against Christianity is moving. And as one farmer friend said, "It's easier to turn a moving vehicle than one that's in park." That's the problem with apathy—it's in park. The man who buried his talent committed the sin of apathy, of indifference.

We cannot be controlled and compelled by love and remain apathetic to God and humankind. The power of the cross breaks the bondage of indifference because it crushes its core—selfishness. Listen to the next verse:

15 and He died for all, **so that** [*say "so that" ...because here is why he died, not for our comfort or our prosperity or so we might feel really good in worship. It was "so that"*] they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.

That's it. The cross breaks the power of the self-life. It's a pretty good definition of what it means to be a Christian: "to no longer live for [ourselves], but for Him who died and rose again on [our] behalf." It is upon this premise, and only on this premise, that we can talk about being new creations in Christ, men and women, young people and children being in union with Jesus, the "first born" among us.

16 Therefore [*because we don't live for ourselves but for Jesus*] from now on we recognize [*or evaluate*] no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh [*in a very limited way*], yet now we know Him in this [*very limited*] way no longer. **17** Therefore if anyone is in union with Christ [*in other words in a spiritual way that could never be attained when he was here only physically*], he is a new creation; the old life has passed away; a new life has begun! Hallelujah.

When I was a youngster I was walking with some of my friends through our backyard. Dad had several fruit trees and had planted a special hybrid apple tree he was fond of. I thought it would be fun to walk over the top of it, bending it down so it would pop back up in the face of the person behind me. But it didn't spring back up. It broke off at the ground. I tried sticking it down into the soil, but in a day or two it began withering. It had been severed from its roots. I now feared being severed from mine.

Jesus said, "I am the Vine you are the branches" (John 15:5). Union with Christ is sharing the same root system. Like my dad's tree, just being stuck in the ground of organized religion isn't enough to keep us from withering. We must share the same roots. Jesus said, "The one who abides in Me bears much fruit" (verse 5).

Imagine for a moment the new creation realities that are formed by abiding in holy union with Jesus. Think how living in Jesus changes how we interact at work, our attitudes and motivations. Abiding in Christ elevates our values and changes how we think, it changes "whatever we do in word or action" (Colossians 3:17).

We spent the other evening with a prayer group in Hubbard that is praying for spiritual hunger to blanket hearts in this area of Iowa. One of the precious souls attending this is a longtime friend named Donna. When we first became her friend she was controversial. You see, Donna had a partner who was also a woman. We never condemned, just invited them to draw close to Jesus. One night at a service in Reinbeck where we served, we had people write down on slips of paper things for which they wanted forgiveness, healing or deliverance. Donna came forward having written but one word on her paper. Something remarkable happened. In Donna's words, the Lord began changing her desires and thinking. Her growing love for Jesus became her center. She walked away from the other relationship and today is happily married to a wonderful man. They are in our circle of friends.

Being with Donna reminds me that union with Christ is not just a theological exercise in professing the right things. It is an experience—a life-changing, life-

infusing encounter.

I have become loosely affiliated with an Episcopal Benedictine monastery in southern Iowa. This group of priests and sisters, married people and single people live in a prayerful rhythm, especially focusing on Scripture and prayer at 7:00 a.m., noon, 5:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. Only six people actually live fulltime at the monastery. Most are like me, living some distance away and with our own vocations but captured by a growing longing for connection with people who take union with Christ very seriously.

I find this a helpful rhythm for giving God a chance to speak to me or redirect my focus. Having specific times for prayer and Scripture meditation, slowing down my pace, offers God a chance to imprint new creation realities upon my heart and mind. Will we just give the Lord a chance to create spiritual union within us?

A man and his wife who was always nagging and complaining and belittling him went on a vacation to Jerusalem. While there the wife suddenly passed away. The Israeli funeral director told the husband that it would cost \$10,000 to have her flown back to the states or, for just \$500 he could have her buried in the Holy Land. The husband thought for a moment and then decided he'd have her flown back home. The funeral director asked, "Why would you spend \$10,000 to ship your wife home when it would be so wonderful to be buried here, and you would spend only \$500?" The man replied, "Two thousand years ago a Jewish carpenter died here, was buried here and three days later he rose from the dead. I just can't take that chance."

How many of us have just not taken the chance of experiencing union with God. A lot of us have filled our lives so completely with the realities of this world that we give God little chance to teach us the depths of new creation realities. John 15 is filled with blessed truths of the new life of abiding in Jesus and of him abiding in us. But notice that in John's gospel, before talking in the fifteenth chapter about dwelling in him, he first talked in the thirteenth chapter about becoming servants, living "no longer...for [ourselves], but for Him who died and rose again on [our] behalf." I conclude with the prayer attributed to Saint Francis: *Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. Amen.*