

*The Mystery of New Creation*

Third Sunday After Pentecost

June 14, 2015

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Texts: 1 Samuel 15.34-16.13;  
Psalm 20,  
2 Corinthians 5.6-17,  
Mark 4.26-34

I wonder if farmers lose their sense of wonder at the remarkable reality of their vocation. I'm sure they do the same way each of us tends to lose our sense of awe once something truly remarkable becomes common. The sheer miracle of birth that overwhelms a parent holding their infant in their arms for the very first time loses some of its sheen when that infant becomes a three year screaming their head off for the fifteenth time that day.

But seriously, hold a seed in your hand and consider the life that is compressed into that small pebble in your hand. This is all the more true when the seed is for a tree or bush that will bear fruit season after season, year and year. If someone were to take the tree itself and the fruit it would produce over its lifetime and the people it would feed through the generations and line all of that life up before you to see and told you that all of this will come from this little tiny seed in your hand - if you didn't have the experience to know how this would be possible or that it was true - wouldn't you think the person was insane to make such a claim?

Creation is remarkable! We could reproduce this conversation a thousand times over as we considered everything from the metabolism of the body to the vastness of the known universe. That in and of itself is part of the beauty of creation; that it is knowable as we learn more and uncover the cause and effect that explains how this seed becomes all that life laid out in front of you.

We are constantly discovering more and more about this world in which we live. The more we understand the more we can achieve. Advances in

technology and medicine and engineering have improved the quality of human life in profound ways. Some of us in the west are rather new to the spiritual gifts that have come from a close reading of the created world. Native American spirituality as well as Celtic spirituality has long received the gifts that come from noticing the ways that the natural world informs human being. I've shared some of these insights before in the prayers of the Celtic tradition. Something as simple as the rhythms of night following day speak to us about the patterns of rest and work that are natural and those of us who "burn the midnight oil" and disregard these natural rhythms do so to our peril. That's the beauty of cause and effect. You figure it out. You live according to it and you know what the outcome will be.

But here's the down side. I should say here's one downside because there are many. When you begin to believe that you can figure it all out, you begin to nurture the illusion that you are in control. You may even begin to see people as fitting into those same cause-and-effect equations. Cultures begin to construct definitions and shared assumptions that do what Gordon spoke about two weeks ago in his sermon. We draw lines and narrowly define who is valuable and who is expendable.

We've been doing this since the beginning of time. Look at this story of Samuel and David today. Samuel had expectations about who the next Monarch of Israel would be based on the values of his day. He would be one of sons of Jesse (not a daughter). He should be the oldest, the tallest, and the strongest. But as each son was passed over you begin to realize that maybe the calculus was off. Seven sons passed over. If you are a student of the scripture you know that numbers always mean something. Seven is the number of creation; the number of completion. God would chose one from outside this perfectly ordered set of sons. God would reach for the youngest - the one who wasn't even important enough to be invited to the service. This is the one God would call forth. And the reason? "The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From 1 Samuel 16. 7, NRSV

We see the very same phrase in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth cautioning that community from becoming too enamored with the leaders among them who seem so impressive by outward appearances but aren't necessarily the ones after God's own heart. Paul was struggling. People in Corinth were questioning his authority. There were divisions in the community. None of this lined up with the cause-and-effect assumptions about good leaders. Good leaders create harmony. Good leaders instill confidence. Good leaders are popular and well loved. Right? Sometimes but not necessarily. Paul is the making the case that what God is looking for are people who use their bodies – their life here and now within the created world – in service of the Lord. That may or may not create harmony and instill confidence or generate approval at any given moment.

In fact, when you commit yourself to the service of God you may find that you are asked to get involved with things that others look at as crazy from their cause-and-effect analysis. Someone quipped at the elders meeting that making a decision about a controversial issue during a capital campaign is not exactly good fund raising strategy. I can remember a moment early in our Living Hope Renovations project when we first heard what this project might cost and we were just shaking our heads. I remember thinking there is no way we are ever going to make this happen. Ron Mulder gave one of those unbelievable pep talks that only Ron can give: incredibly optimistic but grounded in experience (Ron knows what he is talking about). I became convinced by the theme that runs through these texts: that God is surprising.

Even in the cause and effect order of the natural world there is an element of mystery. You prepare the soil, you plant the seed, you understand how the soil interacts with the water and the sun but you don't create the life. That happens while you are sleeping. That's the element of surprise that these parables point toward: the ways that God's Spirit moves in and among the things we do that defy our expectations from a human point of view.

That's where this passage from 2 Corinthians ends today with an invitation to stop looking at each other, at ourselves, and at what is possible from a human point of view. When people live simply for themselves operating in

the cause and effect ways of the world, there are certain assumptions, certain limits on what is possible, what is likely, or what is expected.

On Monday, almost two weeks ago now, I had the privilege of sitting in on a work group that is planning a pilot program for the RCA to help equip congregations to become resources in their community to promote racial reconciliation. While I was there I heard about two other dimensions of the RCA's response to issues of racial tension within our nation. One was a pilot program to train congregations to work at becoming advocates for racial justice. There is a need for healing and reconciliation and there is a need for advocacy and justice. The third project was an education and discipleship effort.

Tony Campbell who is heading up this whole initiative talked about his experience of growing up poor and black in an urban setting. He said that many of the kids he grew up with didn't get out of the cycles of poverty and hopelessness that were rampant around him. But of the ones who did there were two things they had in common: they found a source of hope and they got an education. The hope in almost every case came from a faith community. It was the hope of the gospel that broke through the depressing cause-and-effect world they lived in and made it possible for them to find new life as they pursued an education.

God is not content for us to simply look out at the world, at our life, and those around us from a simple human point of view - as remarkable as the creation around us may be.

God is looking for us to let the love of Christ urge us on to see the new creation that might just be hidden outside of view beyond our typical expectations that may at first blush sound just a little crazy. That's God's specialty - taking the one from left field - the youngest son who wasn't even important enough to be present for the visit from the prophet - to take that one and lift him up to the be king.

When I think about things happening within the world that most make my heart sing, when I think about what makes me come alive the most when it comes to the life of faith, it is stories of new creation. It's the person

trapped in addiction who beyond all expectations finds recovery. It's the church, like the Reformed Church of Greenpoint, that was dying and ready to close its doors finding their mission in the neighborhood and coming alive as they minister to the people around them. It's the impulse to be unrestrained in giving and receiving the love of Jesus with the very ones that the world (and sometimes the church) have written off and set aside.

Here's a word of caution: This impulse of God toward new creation has an element of mystery to it. Unlike the world of cause-and-effect, you cannot always predict or control where it all may lead.

But I say thanks be to God -- that just makes life all the more interesting!

Amen?

Amen.