

2 Corinthians 5:14-17  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (B)  
Sermon given at Friedens UCC  
June 13, 2021

### **The Love of Christ Urges Us On**

based on "Commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17," by Jennifer V. Pietz [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

Wow! Things have changed since I was in the sanctuary last, just a few short weeks ago. It's so wonderful to see your faces, your smiling faces...How wonderful it is that so many of us could receive the vaccine that enables us to unmask!! We are starting to emerge, aren't we? For those of you joining us by zoom, it was great to see *your* smiling faces last week! Wouldn't it be nice if there was a way that we could *all* see each other every week?? – like with a screen and a camera up front, so those in the sanctuary could see those of you on zoom and those on zoom could see those in the sanctuary...I'm just dreaming and I'm actually incredibly grateful for the technology we *do* have that has allowed us to gather at all at times over the last 15 months and which we continue to adapt as we move forward, as we look forward to Gia being back at the organ next week (!), but...humor me...wouldn't it be great? It would give us all a greater sense of the whole, as we worship God together in new ways.

It was Paul's words to the Church in Corinth that struck me this week in thinking about the transition we're going through right now; Paul, who says, "...in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" ...everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new... We are at that seismic-a-point of transformation. Whether we want to be or not, here we are.

And so, I want to talk about transformation today – in light of our current context and in light of our faith. Much of what I'm going to share with you is based on the scholarship of Jennifer Pietz, who writes for one of the resources I look at every week, "Working Preacher." I found her reflections on Paul's letter to the Corinthians especially meaningful this week. Paul's writings can be so circular. It's often hard to understand. She succeeded in cutting through all that and getting at what is underneath.

She talks about transformation, but she doesn't start there. She starts with *what* transforms us as Christians and what carries us through seismic changes.

And if you're wondering what that is, listen again to verse 14:

(I'm going to read the circular stuff, but then we'll pull out the deeper stuff...)

"For the love of Christ urges us on because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves..." "...the love of Christ urges us on...so that those who live no longer live for themselves..."

And this is what she has to say:

"The experience of being truly loved is transformative. When someone sees (the good and bad in us) and is committed to walking with us through life's highs and lows, it strengthens us and helps us live more fully as ourselves. When a friend takes our call (at any time of the day or night)...we gain hope to face another day – not necessarily because our problems have been solved, but because we know that someone cares (that we're not alone in them)...People often come to know love precisely when they are at the end of their own strength or resources and others step in to give sacrificially of themselves." [Jennifer V. Pietz, "Commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17,"

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I know that's been true of me. You might be able to think of a situation like that in your own life. It's part of what it means to be the Church. We promise to walk in faith with one another through the highs and the lows, through the ups and the downs, through the joys and the difficulties. And I've seen you do that with one another.

Pietz writes, "Such experiences change us and motivate us to love and care for others," and goes on to point out that Paul's not just writing in theory. Paul knows this firsthand. "Paul writes as one who has experienced the unsurpassable love of Christ that transformed him from a persecutor of the church to a servant of the gospel. When he confidently declares that 'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away...everything has become new!' he's speaking out of his own experience." [[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)] He's saying, "Look. If it's possible for me, it's possible for you. This is what God does, in Christ." "Christ's love...brings people into trusting relationship with God and

each other and empowers them to live out that same love, which seeks good and growth in others.” [[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)]

Now this isn’t easy. Pietz points out that “death is necessary for new life to emerge.” [[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)] – that’s true for Jesus; that’s *the* story of our faith; that’s true for Paul – who, as I said, is “transformed from being a persecutor of the church to a servant of the gospel,” [[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)] that’s true for us...and I’ll say more about that in a minute.

But it’s not easy. We’re wired to fight death – and I don’t mean only literal death, but the end of things. “Dying is *painful*.” [[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)] We don’t like when the illusion of control is stripped away, as it has been the last year. We don’t like to surrender, even to God. But Paul’s talk of a new creation presents not only this painful challenge of everything old passing away, but a promise. It’s not only painful, but promising. Pietz writes, in Christ, we are assured of being freed - set free/liberated/saved – as we sometimes say – “from a ...way of living that compels us to prove our worth by our accomplishments and seek our own interests at the expense of others.” [[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)] And, “when our illusion of control is stripped away, we can expect God to surprise us again and again by doing a new thing.” [[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)] That’s the promise.

That doesn’t necessarily feel good, but it *is good news!* Pietz proclaims that, “Living for Christ means letting go of old thought patterns and habits that are not life – giving (and) opening ourselves to embodying divine love...allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, to surrender to being made new.” [[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)]

So, what does that mean for us now?? ...and in the coming weeks??? Well, for me it raises some questions. I don’t have answers for these questions. They’re questions that we need to ask ourselves and that your leadership needs to consider as we move forward together.

While it’s great to see smiling faces and wonderful to be vaccinated, we’ve kind of just drifted to that. And I wonder, have we thought it through? Have we thought about those who are immuno-compromised, those with weakened immune systems? Have we thought about families with children who aren’t

eligible to be vaccinated yet and are perhaps even too young to wear a mask? We had two families here on Mother's Day with infants. Would they feel welcome now? We may know we are all vaccinated, but will they know we value their children and their children are safe here? It's a matter of trust. It's a matter of faith, faith that starts with love, love that seeks good and grows beyond our individual desires and reaches out to others, sacrificial love. I sometimes wonder, and I'm not suggesting we do this necessarily, but I do wonder about those who must still wear masks for whatever reason – not vaccinated, immune-compromised, whatever – I sometimes think of wearing a mask in solidarity...like when someone undergoes chemotherapy and loses their hair and someone who loves them dearly shaves their head, not because they have to, but in solidarity, out of sacrificial love so their friend knows they are not alone.

Like I said, I don't have the answers to these questions and others – What about singing? I can't wait until that day, but it does raise even more questions to consider. We may not yet have all the answers, but we get a greater sense of the whole when we take these questions into account in light of our faith – They aren't just practical questions. They're "God" questions - and when we are intentional about being the new creation in Christ that we are TODAY. We are different than we were on March 8, 2020.

As we continue to navigate this uncharted territory, what will we let go of? What will we embrace? To what does God call us? Do we sense the love of Christ urging us on, carrying us through this seismic moment of transformation, so that we no longer live only for ourselves? What does that look like for *us*? – not some other church down the street, but us?

Pietz concludes, "The true love that every human being deeply longs for has already been given to us in Christ. It is a love that knows everything about us and embraces us anyway. It is the love that transforms us to reflect Christ to our neighbors. It is a powerful, reconciling love that makes it possible for people who mistrust and misunderstand each other to be brought into (life-giving community)." We aren't just a group of individuals. We are a community of faith. "Declaring that the old life has passed and God's new life has already come is an act of faith." [[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)]

Beyond these specifics, through *all* of life's transitions, the love of Christ urges us on, making all things new. And I trust that as we navigate uncharted territory, Jesus leads the way and new life is ready to burst forth from us even now! Thanks be to God!!  
Amen.