

So, when was the last time you tried to reinvent yourself? Don't be too shy, I think we've all done it to some extent at one time or another. New Year's tends to be the popular time to do it, but the mood can strike us whenever. And then it's time to do things like eat better, hit the gym regularly, cut out some bad habits, take up an impressive hobby or a foreign language. And how well have those worked out for you? I'm just going to go out on a limb and suggest that most of them fizzled. If not, hey, congratulations. But you have to admit, that's not the norm. Most of our efforts to really "change" ourselves don't work in the end. Now if I could give you a clear-cut answer as to why that is and how to fix it, well I could probably make a million bucks on the self-help circuit. I don't have that. But what I do have is some clear knowledge from our Lord to pass on to you about who you really are.

See I think that's part of the problem in trying to change ourselves. We fail to understand who we already are to start with. That person we are at the core can't (and shouldn't) be changed, but if we don't know who that is, if we don't really understand ourselves in Christ, we can't work toward being that person better. If that sounded terribly confusing, that's okay. I'm going to back up and explain.

The first step to this understanding is understanding where we've come from. As Christians we have to know both who we are and who we were. If we don't know who we were, we can't appreciate or grow in who we are. Now, unfortunately who we were is not a pretty sight. It's not fun to look at or remember. But we need to see it. We need to look back and know that we were born dead. Born in the image of our father Adam, corrupted in sin, separated from God by a divide we could never cross. And maybe we could cry that's not fair. Not fair that we're born without a chance, already dead when we start.

But it's not like we've done anything to distinguish ourselves from that start. Even if the slate were neutral we've only ever soiled it since then. By nature we are lifeless and empty, consumed only with selfishness and greed. In that state we are cut off from our God and if that state had continued, we would one day have that arrangement made permanent in the fires of hell.

Though the fault is ours, the blame is ours and the guilt is ours, God does not want you to stay apart from him. God does not want you to stay dead. God wants to bring you close, to save you, to deliver you from evil and trouble. Except God is holy. The sin you are covered with cannot stand in his presence. He cannot draw you close, you cannot live with him when you are dead. So God fixed that. He took steps to make you alive. Any one of us should be able to tell us how he did this, the details are familiar to all of us. But like the spouse never tires of hearing their other half say "I love you", so we never tire of hearing how our God loved us enough to die for us.

The first step was removing the guilt of the sin that separated us. Since there is only us and God and the guilt had to be paid for, God himself was the only alternative to punishing us directly. So God gave up his heavenly throne, became one of us and died in your place. The perfect life and sacrifice of Jesus removed the guilt that separated you from God. It provided a perfect life to cover yours and make you able to enter the presence of the Father. By Jesus' life and death the gates of heaven were opened for you.

The second step was bringing this amazing gift to you personally. God wants you to have it. But the way we are born dead in sin means we cannot approach God to claim it. In fact it means that when God comes to give it, we are more likely to run away from him or refuse it. And so God must change us from the inside to complete this process. He must take what is dead and bring it to life. And so God sent a seed to you. His word. The very means that teaches us what he did for us also contains the power to make us believe and trust it.

Some are called to scatter that seed. One of them scattered that seed to your heart. Some are called to water that soil. One of them watered your heart. But like the farmer who scatters and waters, none of us are responsible for making the seed actually grow. That is in God's hands alone. The Holy Spirit caused that seed of his word to sprout within you and grow into a new life. This new life is completely different from the death you lived in before. This life loves God. This life trusts God. And this new life you have will last forever. At some point your body may be separated from your soul for a time, but the life will go on. This life is eternal. This is what it meant last week when we read from Revelation, "**Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them.**" (20:6). We have been resurrected from the dead already. The second death we die in the body will have no power over us because of this.

This is amazing good news. This is truth we never tire of hearing. But let's not make the mistake of thinking that once we reach this point we are "done". There are those who think that once you have this knowledge of God's gift of salvation you can go your separate ways from the Lord until you need to come back and pick that gift up. "Thanks for promising to save me, God. I'll see you when I need it!" This kind of attitude completely misunderstands what our salvation *is*.

Our salvation from our God is not a gift that you just unwrap when you need it. It's not something you keep a loose eye on so you know where to find it when the time comes. Your salvation is the new life planted inside you by the word of God. It is the new life that the Holy Spirit caused to come forth from that seed and that he continues to cause to grow through that same word. That life inside you *is* the saved you. It is alive and will remain alive forever. To get back to our original question of understanding ourselves properly, that life is you.

And like any living plant, that life must grow and it must produce fruit by the very nature of it being alive. This is exactly what Paul describes in our reading for today: <read text: Colossians 1:3-8>.

Paul gives thanks for the faith and love that the Colossians have, faith and love that come naturally from the hope they have in their salvation by Jesus Christ. Your salvation is the fact that you are alive in Christ. That life is you. That life will live forever. And that life shows itself naturally. Just like a living person has a pulse and breath and walks and talks, so the new life growing in us shows itself naturally. For it *not* to show, means that the life simply isn't there!

So this is what I mean when I talk about understanding who you are. Our real goal shouldn't be to try to change ourselves, but rather to understand the person we are in Christ and to strive in Christ to *be* that person. God sees you in Christ as holy. Blameless. Without fault. Full of love for him and those around you. That *is* who the new life is. That *is* who you are! That is the fruit of the life planted in you. So why do we not do this all the time? Because the dead you is still there, still screaming and kicking and trying to drag you back down to its level. On our own, that self would kill the new you and take you back to the way things were. Given power and strength by God through his word, that old self doesn't stand a chance of winning.

We all want to be better than we are. The beauty of the truth is that in Christ we are already better than we are. By God's power we are able to overcome the old self and let those living fruits of our faith blossom forth continually. When we understand that being better means living up to the life we already have, and when we understand that this new life is given its strength by God through his word and sacrament, then we have the right plan finally to move forward in this life.

Not that we will never fail. We will still sin. For each sin there will still be forgiveness. But what we can do is approach the problem in the right way, knowing both the outcome we actually desire (to be more godly) and the means we need to gain that outcome (growing ourselves in God's word). Doing this will allow us to actually live closer to the person we really are, and to show forth those fruits of love in our daily lives.

The outward actions we want to change require starting at the heart with the gospel truth that God has given us. And another truth we need to realize in all this is that this is just as true for others as it is for us. We all have this urge to want to fix the world, or at least to stop that other person from doing the wrong thing. But just like we do to ourselves, we often approach this in the wrong way too. Paul says it is the gospel that grows and bears fruit all over the world. If we want people to show goodness with their lives, that must come from the same change within that motivates us. It must come from the gospel truth.

Make no mistake, this world is doomed. It's going down. But that doesn't mean we should stop trying to care for it or just crash it into ditch right now. We can fight against the earthly forces of darkness and try to improve what we have here as well. But we don't do that the ways we often think of. We do it by bringing faith to people one at a time. Only by healing people from the inside and bringing them to life in the truth will they be able to bear the same fruits of faith that we are able to now. If you want to help make this world a better place, you need to work to help God save people for eternity.

We do that by doing for others what others did for you. We plant. We water. We scatter the word of God far and wide. We water that seed wherever and whenever we can. But remember we cannot force it to grow. We cannot make it spring to life. That is in God's hands alone. But whether we see results or not, that doesn't change what we do. We sow the seeds of life wherever we can simply because sharing that truth is another part of who we are and what God asks us to do.

Brothers and sisters by the good news of God you are alive. You are alive forever now. Live that life. Be in God's word at every opportunity to learn what that life is and receive God's power to remain strong in it. And by your God then continue to bear that living fruit of the gospel. Amen.