

“A new me”

Building a strong self-image – Part I

March 18, 2007

Text: Isaiah 43:16-21, Philippians 3:4b-14

I.

In our wider culture, all the time, we talk about the importance of a positive self-image. Certainly, psychologists and counselors express this concern. And as parents, we go to great lengths to instill a positive sense of self in our children.

Fervently, we want them to believe in themselves, to have confidence as a person, and to have the best possible chance to utilize the gifts God has given them and to realize their full potential as a human being, a child of our Creator God.

Although in my personal experience, I had wonderful parents, still, many of us did not have the benefit of good parenting as children growing up.

Sometimes our parents were absent.

1. They simply were not there when we needed them.
 2. Perhaps they were too busy at work or at play ...
 3. or they didn't get along with the other parent and so they weren't around much.
- In other cases, our parents lacked the education, the sensitivity or the awareness to give us what we needed as children and youth growing up.
 - Sometimes they simply had too many personal issues themselves and ended up projecting their own insecurities, regrets, resentments and anger on to us.

Having said all of this, again and again, our Christian faith emphasizes moving beyond our past; it emphasizes forgiveness and forgetting ... and the new beginning to which God invites us everyday as a person of faith.

II.

There's a story out of Mexico about a father and son who had become estranged. Some years back, the son had run away. Overcome with a piercing sadness by it all, one day the father set off to find the son. For months he searched for him to no avail.

Finally, out of desperation, the father put an ad in a Mexico City newspaper. The ad read: *Dear Panchito, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father.*

Finally, Saturday rolls around and, whoa ... *800 Panchitos* showed up ... looking for forgiveness and love from their father.

There's a lot of hurt out there, isn't there? A lot of pain ... from fragmented relationships, dreams gone south ... expectations left unfulfilled.

As it turns out, forgetting and forgiving what the river of our life has washed over us, is a lot more easily said than done.

III.

In our reading this morning from **Philippians**, Paul unpacks for us a new sense of self ... what we might call **a new me**. This **new me** that he talks about is totally rooted in his experience of Christ, and in his sense of Christ's sufferings on the cross as a qualification for his resurrection.

This new *self* that Paul speaks of, the **new me**, is clearly NOT about us and our worldly achievements. It's the **new me** that we become through a total *turning* to God ... a *turning* that comes through a total *trust* in Christ.

Lent is a time for such *turning*.

When former President Bill Clinton was working through some of his own personal *stuff* ... trying to get himself right with God, at a Prayer Breakfast back in September of 1998, in repentant tones, he read from a book entitled ***Gates of Repentance*** ...

Now is the time for turning, he read.

- *The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red to orange.*
- *The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the south.*
- *The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter.*

For leaves, birds and animals, turning comes instinctively. But for us, turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn.

And whether our *turning* is away from sin or a *turning* towards a new awakening to God's promises, unless we turn, we're forever trapped in the tug of yesterday's ways.

IV.

As people of faith, friends, our lives are not primarily about us. They're about our connectedness to God and to God's purposes for our lives ...

Getting back to Paul, our lives are not about our impressive lists of status and achievement. *If you want to brag*, says Paul, *look at me*. And then he enumerates his

substantial resume: circumcised on the 8th day ... a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, and as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Paul's point is that he can boast with the best of them. But that's not what our lives are about. Our lives are about the depths of our connection to the living Christ—the Christ of suffering love, the Christ whose death God used to show us how to love.

In this same vein, Paul talks about the loss of his many assets ... which he labels as *meaningless* by comparison. Check it out:

1. *Yet whatever gains I had ...I regard as loss because of Christ ...*
2. *And then going on, More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord ...*
3. *For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things ... and I regard them as rubbish ... in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.*

What this is about, Paul says, is *not having a righteousness* that the world accords me, but *a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ*.

What does that mean? It means that our lives are not about who the world tells us we are. Our lives are about who God claims that we are ... and calls us to become in Christ.

The bottom line here is a total transvaluation of values—away from the world and toward the spirit—that gives birth to a new self, **a new me**. The new self, the new me, comes as a consequence of *the turning*.

It's more than a mere forgetting or forgiving of the past. It is ***a transcending of the past***. We rise above our past—with all of its attendant baggage—by a *turning to Christ* in total trust.

If we can somehow grasp the profound significance of this, on a personal level, there's enormous power here for liberation; to be liberated—freed—from our past ... as we take on a new self ... a self that comes *through faith in Christ Jesus*.

V.

Again, this is more than simply forgetting and forgiving. In trying to strengthen our self-image and develop a stronger sense of self, we talk all the time about forgiveness ... about forgiving a parent, a spouse ... whoever has somehow twisted our spirit with some combination of dysfunctional guilt and personal put downs for whatever worn out series of reasons.

We talk almost cavalierly about how we have to be able to forget and forgive so we can move on. And it's true. We all need to be able to do this. But Paul is talking about more

than this. He's talking about becoming a totally new person ... a totally new self ...
A NEW ME.

In other words, when we're truly IN Christ, our whole being, our whole self, rises above all the negative stuff that's been holding us back; stuff that we've been unable to forget ... unable to forgive ... unable somehow to move beyond.

The end result is a *transvaluation* of values. We become a new self.

VI.

This **new me** comes by discarding the *old righteousness* (the righteousness that comes from the world) and putting on the *new righteousness* that comes through faith in Christ.

Another way of getting a hold of this is the reminder to *never let the world tell us who we are*. This is so important ... because all the time there are voices out there ...

- trying to pull us down ...
- trying to hold us back from a *turning to God*.

I want to share again the poignant story I shared some weeks back ... where Rabbi Marc Gafni was recalling one of the best bar mitzvahs he had ever performed. It was for a boy named Louis. This is a great story.

You may remember that Louis was awkward and sad. For some reason his parents had a low opinion of their son, even thinking him incapable of learning the Hebrew necessary to be able to recite the scripture verses for his bar mitzvah.

However, Rabbi Gafni was determined to bring out the best in Louis. With this in mind, he spent extra time teaching him the songs and prayers. Soon, he discovered that Louis, in act, was smart and that he had an outstanding singing voice.

On the day of his bar mitzvah, Louis performed beautifully. And at the end of the ceremony, Rabbi Gafni stood and spoke directly to Louis ... saying to him:

1. *Louis, this morning you met your real self. **This is who you are.***
2. *You are good, graceful, talented, and smart.*
3. *And no matter what people told you yesterday ... or what they tell you tomorrow, REMEMBER: this is you. Remember and don't ever lose it.*

VII.

At the end of the day, our lives are not about our impressive earthly accolades and trophies. Our lives are about the power of *suffering love* to change our hearts and spirits and to refocus the way we embrace the world.

As Christians, we're meant—always—to be something more ...

- something more than unforgiven ...
- something more than simply wealthy and famous ...
- something more than too full of ourselves ... or wallowing in the depths of low self-esteem.

We're meant to be totally loved ... and therefore totally alive to the promises of God that have been etched into our spirit at creation.

And so, once we dare to believe this, along with Paul, we can embrace the future with promise and hope—all of us ... **forgetting what lies behind** *and straining forward to what lies ahead.*

Giving ourselves in absolute trust to the life-giving process of knowing the love God gives us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlchurch.com