

All things new

Sept. 18, 2016

“Seeing through newly opened eyes”

Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Isaiah 65: 17-25

Introduction

“All things new”? That seems to be a strange theme for a long retired old senior to preach about. Don’t we at my age look mostly in the rear-view mirror at our lives already mostly spent? We are at that place in life where we write memoirs, not new visions. We speak of the good old days when we didn’t have to keep up with technology that leaves us far behind. We bemoan the Pokemon phenomena which totally bewilders us. And then I have to confess yet that I don’t even own a cell phone, let alone use face book or twitter. And I have to confess that I would be terrified to come to this pulpit with only a tablet computer like some of you preachers do.

“All things new” is surely some plot, or some deep seated joke on us seniors who are mostly discombobulated and terrified by the hurricane of new technology which totally befuddles us and which we can’t even begin to comprehend, let alone keep up with – unless, at our age, the theme is meant to remind us of new life after death, which is surely getting closer all the time.

The thing is, though, that there are quite a few texts in the Bible which do talk about “All things new”. And I rather like these texts.

Isaiah 65:17-25

The first of these, from Isaiah 65, has long been a favourite of mine. Out of a period of despair and brokenness and captivity and the destruction of the holy city of Jerusalem and its magnificent temple there comes an incredible message of new hope and new life.

Isaiah offers this vision from God: “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth...be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight...no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress...” Then this text ends with an impossible reconciliation: “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together...” Predator and victim sharing the same space and feeling safe together. Can that ever happen? Predator and victim feeling safe together? Wow! What about human predators and human victims?

Isaiah offers a poetic and prophetic vision-dream of what the future could still be, a thing offering new hope if only you open your eyes to what God is doing and is still going to do.

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

The second of these texts is from 2 Corinthians 5. I really like this text now, but as a 14 year old it made my life miserable. We were in the middle of an evangelistic campaign in our church, and we were promised that if we responded to the altar call we would become a new person. The old would be wiped clean. This Corinthian text was used as promise. The King James translation said it so clearly. “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new”. If I just came forward, or at least lifted up my hand to signal my conversion, I would be a new person, cleansed, pure, done with the old Gary.

Well, I did put up my hand that evening. I wasn't brave enough to actually come forward. But the next day this new creature Gary went hunting with his trusty shotgun. A pheasant flew up, I shot at it, missed, and started swearing. And then it hit me. I was supposed to be a new creature. Swearing was the old Gary, wasn't it, not the new one. What a disillusionment!

Only much later did I become aware that the King James translation of the Greek text totally misses the mark. And it made me miserable. I'll get back to King James and its mistranslation later.

Corinth. First I want to take you with me to Corinth. Some years ago now, in the year 2000, as part of our Egypt sabbatical, Lydia and I spent a day

exploring the ruins of ancient Corinth together with other MCCer's, including our son Kendall. Lydia, I think, really enjoyed standing on the spot where it is thought Paul stood to preach. Perhaps she was imagining debating with Paul about what he was saying about women in the church - especially that stuff about women being silent in church. Paul spent 18 months in Corinth establishing the church there. And it was a difficult birthing.

Corinth was a very cosmopolitan city, a place of thriving commerce - a very multicultural city. Its citizens were a rather volatile mix of peoples full of energy, vigour, and life, looking to the future unrestrained by tradition.

And here Paul founds a church, a church full of energy, and diversity, and a church full of conflicts and problems.

Paul had already dared to break down so many of the old barriers and old prejudices. Together with Peter and James He had brought Jews and Gentiles together into the same church, an almost impossible barrier to breach. He said that in Christ there is no barrier between free and slave, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Greek.

But here in Corinth this mix of peoples is proving to be quite volatile. The church is in fact full of conflict. This is not at all surprising given the context. There are major leadership conflicts which Paul addresses in the first chapters of his first letter to Corinth. There are big "worship wars" between those more charismatic and those more cerebral which Paul addresses in chapters 12-14 in that letter. And then there is the rather blatant snubbing of the poor by the wealthy while observing communion, addressed in chapter 11.

By the time Paul writes this, his second letter to the church at Corinth he is in a bit more of a reflective mode. He says of his first letter, "For I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you". (2 Cor. 2:4). Perhaps he is apologizing for the harsh tone of his first letter, but he also says he was chastising them out of love.

And now, in this second letter, he is ready to paint a big picture vision of what the church can be in Christ. So we get back to our text, the one that I

struggled with so much as a youth, the one that the King James translators just got wrong.

The Greek text does not say if anyone is in Christ he is a new creature. The better translation says that “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation (not a new person but a new creation): everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” It’s not really about becoming a totally new creature inside. It’s about seeing all of God’s creation in a new way. When we are in Christ we see all of creation through Christ’s eyes. We look at the world differently. Our eyes are opened to a new way of seeing. We see through the eyes of Jesus.

What then is so new? Paul continues with this theme of newness. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation: that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself...and now we are ambassadors for Christ...”

The big word is reconciliation. It is bringing together what has been driven apart. It is to help bring people and God together. It is to help bring separated people together – is it even to help bring predator and victim together safely? There is no more Jew or Greek, or male and female, or rich and poor, or free and slave, or liberal and conservative, or heterosexual and homosexual. In Christ we become one. The whole work of God through Jesus is reconciliation, a bringing together. And it is that ministry that we followers of Jesus are entrusted with. And that is breathtakingly new. That is the new creation. That is the new way of seeing what God is doing. And then we are challenged to participate in this bringing together of people who have been kept apart.

What a massive paradigm shift. We know something of paradigm shifts as we move from a modernity mindset to a post-modern and post-Christian world view. And that is huge, changing how we do church, how we read the Bible, how we try to evangelize, how we live in our world. But I think the paradigm shift that came with Jesus, articulated here in 2nd Corinthians, was the biggest of all. Paul challenges his people, and us, to see all of creation, all people, through the eyes of Jesus, who came as an agent of reconciliation – a peace-making agent.

The challenge is to look at our world, at all of creation, through new eyes – the eyes of Jesus

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new”.

I have been trying to reflect on issues in our present world context that need reconciliation; that need to be looked at through new eyes. Where do I – where do we – see this new creation. Where do we see, through Jesus eyes, what is becoming new?

I want to explore only two of many spheres of newness and reconciliation. I choose these two as illustrations of a much bigger picture.

- 1) Close to home – personal, family, church. Looking inwardly**
- 2) Our relationship with indigenous peoples - looking outwardly at one specific set of relationships that desperately needs renewing.**

1) Our immediate context.

One of the new disciplines, or at least new perspectives, that many of our pastors are now embracing, is loosely called “spiritual direction”. Our son Kendall, who is a pastor in London, Ontario, is going to spend part of his upcoming sabbatical leave taking a spiritual direction course from AMBS.

Spiritual direction is primarily helping us ask this question: Where do we see God already at work in our lives and in our community? It’s doing what Paul is challenging us to do – look with new eyes at all of creation. It is looking through the eyes of Jesus. It is looking at our personal context through the eyes of asking where we see God at work among us.

We pastors, we caregivers – and I speak as a former pastor – have a huge temptation to try to be fixers. If there is a problem we are determined to try to fix it. If there is pain somewhere we will try to ameliorate it. If there is a broken relationship we bring the velcro. But there is so much pain in our world, so much brokenness, so many issues, so many problems. We fixers are inclined to lose energy, lose sleep, lose perspective, lose our bearings. We may even lose our faith.

Instead of first asking “how can I fix this”, it is so helpful to instead ask “Where do we see God already at work?” Back in 2003, at the conclusion of our long process here at TUMC around gay inclusion, many of us, certainly including me as pastor, felt broken and discouraged and angry. We had tried so hard to fix things, and we couldn’t. We wounded each other. But in hindsight – we couldn’t see it then – in hindsight we realized, I think, that God was at work in our mess and in our lives anyway. We just didn’t see it then.

Where was God at work among us? Surprisingly, in our brokenness, our humanness, our pain, even in our arrogance. TUMC did become stronger, more whole. Reconciliations happened, including some that were very personal to me. Healing did happen. We are a different congregation now, a healthier one I think.

I sensed quite a bit of apprehension about Mennonite Church Canada assembly in Saskatoon this July. There were huge decisions to be made. We knew there were deep divisions among us, an almost unbridgeable polarization, especially around issues of sexuality. Lydia and I live-streamed some of the sessions from Abbotsford - and were amazed at the healthy tone of the dialogue. Deeply held convictions were expressed dialogically, and with respect, with those who held opposite views.

It seemed to us that God was at work building new creations and new reconciliations in Mennonite Church Canada.

It is that spirit of respect, integrity, dialogue and vulnerability, and patience – and looking to God, which I pray will be the foundation of our present on-going story here at TUMC.

I invite us all to ask, “Where do we see God at work in our personal lives, in our families, in our church, both locally, nationally and internationally.

2) Canada and its indigenous peoples.

We in Canada are, I think, at a kind of crossroad with huge new opportunities for reconciliation in the relationship between our indigenous peoples and us settlers. Our record here has been dreadful. We are just now coming to terms with the terrible injustices of the residential school system. (Both of our daughters' parents and our son-in-law's parents were deeply wounded by their residential school experience. Those wounds run generations long). We may finally have an inquiry into the forgotten victims of murdered and missing indigenous women. And, who knows, we may yet take mercury poisoning seriously in Grassy Narrows and make water safe to drink again and fish caught there safe to eat.

And (and this is very personal to me) we are now hearing about and trying to come to terms with what has come to be named "The sixties Scoop". The sixties scoop refers to the very deliberate move by our governments to adopt native children into white families in order to "take the Indian out of the Indian". We, along with hundreds of Mennonite parents, became part of that sixties scoop. In 1973 Lydia and I adopted an aboriginal daughter who came from the Siksika Blackfoot reserve. We did so with noble intentions. We knew nothing about government motive. We just wanted to love a beautiful black-haired girl.

But we were very naïve. We didn't realize how helpful it would have been to try to connect her with her people, her heritage, her founding spirituality. This journey she kind of made on her own. And then she invited us into it. We went to powwows where our grandson danced in full, splendid regalia. We hosted parties for native friends. And we participated in sacred native ceremonies.

Have you ever participated in a sweat lodge ceremony? Our daughter had two weddings – fortunately both to the same man – a Mennonite wedding here at TUMC and a native wedding at the Sagamok reserve. That wedding started with a sweat lodge ceremony.

The small light proof sweat-lodge is built on the day of the ceremony. A large fire is built at its entrance, and a number of large stones thrown in to heat through and through. We crowd into that small space in the sweat-

lodge. The flap closes. It is pitch dark. The ceremony starts with what felt like an old fashioned prayer meeting. The elder invites prayer requests just like we do every worship service, and prays for every request.

Then, our hearts now prepared, the flap is opened and half of the heated rocks are brought into the center pit. The flap is closed, water poured on the rocks, and heat pours out, and sweat pours out of your body. And then everyone starts praying out loud, all at the same time, in several different languages, really an amazing experience. I found it very easy to pray there.

After 15 minutes the flap is opened. We are told we can leave if we have had enough. Some of my family do. I am stubborn and stay. The last of the rocks are brought in, the flap closed, water poured. It gets even hotter than before. Think sauna at double the heat. 15 more minutes. I am wrung out and prayed out. And feel wonderful, especially after jumping into the near-by small river to cool off.

Native spirituality. We had hoped to expunge that from our indigenous peoples. And now it may just be that recovering it will bring new healing to them, and will be a part of how settlers and indigenous people will learn to respect each other's spirituality and move toward God's reconciliation.

I think God's Spirit is at work in these beginnings of healing and reconciliation. And I hope that I, and we, can be a small part of that work of God.

Conclusion

Yes, I am glad to be retired – a retired pastor. I was ready to let go of the challenges and responsibilities and duties – and privileges – of that calling, a calling which I loved. I am quite content to accept a few “one-off” invitations like this sermon.

But no one is ever retired from asking – “Where is God at work in our personal lives, our family lives, our church lives, our lives as citizens of Canada and the world. We are never retired from being agents of

reconciliation and ambassadors of a new way of seeing all of creation. Our texts for today are still a joy and a challenge for me, and I hope for all of us.

Says Isaiah, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth...be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating...”

Says Paul, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old is passing away; see, everything is becoming new.”

If only we can see it, and believe it.