

“A NEW GPS”
II Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17; Psalm 46

When Kate, my daughter, was in college she had a roommate with whom she participated in many activities. This young woman made good grades, is bright, talented, and as my daddy used to say, “as cute as a speckled pup under a little red wagon.”

In January of 2002, she and Kate were making plans to study in France that coming fall. Discussions included how to become assigned to host families near each other, whether their French would be good enough for classes at the Sorbonne, where one could obtain subway passes, how much it cost to eat at the Louvre, whether lap top computers could be used to get email, and of course, how in the world to stay in touch with their friends back home. Ideas, dreams, plans, illusions and delusions all cascaded down the waterfall that is university life. One of the wonderful elements of college is that everything looks possible, the world opens before one like a cornucopia of opportunities. Their most difficult French discussion would be whether to have their morning croissants with or without the chocolate filling.

Then the phone rang, and Kate watched her friend’s face turn from joy to shock to fear. The caller was the young woman’s mother. Her father worked for Enron, a middle management engineer making a good salary with significant benefits. But her mother was calling to tell her that day her father had both lost his job and watched his Enron filled 401(k) tumble from substantial to worthless. The Eiffel tower and the Louvre crumbled in the distance as the question arose whether a Duke education was still a possibility. The mother informed her daughter she would need to immediately head to the college’s financial aid office.

Subsequent months displayed the dirty little secret of the financial boom up until 2002 — it wasn’t quite as good as we were told. As investors, large and small, poured their savings and dreams into stocks, some CEOs, financial officers, boards of directors, and accountants cooked the books, made their companies look profitable, stimulated their companies’ stock so they could sell at a huge profit before the house of cards fell. No less than Federal Reserve chairman, Allan Greenspan, a strong advocate of corporate America, characterized it as “an infectious greed” that contaminated the business community. The lying, the cheating, the sometimes legal, but immoral, shenanigans stretched their tentacles into the highest levels of corporate and political America. As our 401(k)’s fell in free fall, we were confronted with accountants taking the fifth, CEOs with blank stares saying they had no idea, members of corporate boards proclaiming they just happened to sell at the right time.

Of course, the stock market decline makes people more cautious with their money; they buy less; they don’t go on vacation; they don’t invest in new companies. Consequently, people lose their jobs, start ups can’t get financing, people decide to postpone retirement, kids drop out of college or don’t go to

France, because a small group of people decided that already having millions and millions of dollars just wasn't enough. As we search the world for anti-American terrorists, we are discovering that the people producing the greatest negative impact on America and world society wear coats and ties, wielding false financial reports instead of guns. And I have told this story just in case we thought 2002 was an aberration, that greed resided only in Enron like companies. The 2007 banking crisis reminded us that selfishness, greed, sin remain a powerful force in life, a force with grave consequences.

These scandals are vivid reminders that how we conduct our lives, the decisions we make matter. Whether we are CEOs or the guy who cleans up the board room, what we decide, how we act, impacts other people. And the Apostle Paul tells us this is where Christianity must make a difference. "...[Christ] died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them...so if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

In this passage Paul elucidates two of the central doctrines of the Christian faith, doctrines that affect everything from our personal lives to corporate America. The first central belief of the Christian faith is that Christ died for all.

The word "all" is very important in this statement and in what we believe as Christians. We declare Jesus Christ came to earth and gave His life for every single human being. There are no exceptions or exemptions here. No one is outside the pale of forgiveness and eternal life.

Now, this doctrine sounds good. It glibly rolls off the tongue. It provides our belief system with the high road in ethics and love. But it's pretty hard to sustain. It's relatively easy for me to look out over this congregation and believe that Christ died for each one of you. It's not hard to imagine all of you being welcomed through the Pearly Gates. Nor is it difficult to visualize my willingness to aid every one of you in any way I can. I don't have an iota of trouble believing Jesus Christ loves each one of you, died for you, and calls me to do all I can to help you.

But what about OJ Simpson or the ex-chairman of BP or Brad Sigmon, who a few years ago was on trial here in Greenville for using a baseball bat to murder his girlfriend's mother and father? Do we believe Christ died for them? Do we believe they, too, can repent, be forgiven, begin to live a Christ-like life? And even if they don't, are we willing to love them, treat them as one of God's chosen, do all we can to aid them?

Now, this is hard. It's difficult for me to look at rapists, murderers, terrorists, unscrupulous CEOs and remember Christ died for them. But, that is what Paul meant when he used the word "all." It is a strong reminder the Church is not some upper middle class social club for appropriate acting people. We are founded on the belief that all of us have fallen short of the glory of God and every single one of us carries the gift of salvation. No matter who we are, or what we have done, we are children of God, and have the potential to live for Christ. Paul

believed every single human being possessed the ability to be changed, to become Christ like. But I wonder if we really believe that?

Three doctors die and confront St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. The first doctor says, “St. Peter, I found a cure for leprosy, built hospitals in Africa, and saved thousands of lives.” St. Peter grants him entry.

The second doctor says, “St. Peter, I found a cure for polio, and saved millions of lives.” So, St. Peter lets him in too.

The third doctor says, “St. Peter, I perfected modern health care by creating the HMO concept, single handedly saving thousands of hospitals from financial ruin.”

St. Peter says to him, “Okay, you can come in, but only for four days.”

Most of us believe Christ died for everyone; we just want to place a few restrictions on how that works. But Paul reminds us Jesus Christ died for all, as in every single human being.

Each person can seek, find, and obtain the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. But Paul elucidates another core belief of Christianity. If we are loved and forgiven, becoming a “new creation,” then we will show that change in our lives.

There is a tension in Christianity. We cannot earn our salvation. There is absolutely nothing we can do to make ourselves worthy of God’s love and forgiveness. What we call grace, God’s forgiveness, is a gift, something that cannot be earned or deserved. But, those who receive this love and forgiveness, who pursue this grace, will illustrate it in how we live. It’s kind of like love and marriage, as the song says you can’t have one without the other. You can’t earn God’s acceptance, but when given, we will live as God intends. To not do so illustrates that the faith is not a part of our lives. We don’t do things to earn God’s favor, but we will do them if we have accepted that love and forgiveness. As Martin Luther said, “We are not Christian because we do good works; we do good works because we are Christian.”

This dynamic is not new to us. We are well aware of it, but that doesn’t make it any easier to accomplish. As the corporate scandals illustrate, it is so easy to get off course.

This week, I thought about becoming a “new creation,” and how that works out in everyday existence. And it struck me this is so difficult because we are called to change when everything around us continues in the same patterns. While our hearts and minds may be recreated by God’s love and forgiveness, our environment remains static. We still get sick. Our parents still age and die. We lose our jobs, the stock market falls. People still gossip about us. Our children still bring home bad grades. In the midst of a seemingly unchanging world, why and how do we change? It sounds nice, but what does it really mean?

We believe God’s love and forgiveness, being “in Christ” as the Apostle Paul calls it, gives us the power and motivation to be different. When we allow God to work within us, He enables us to redirect our motivation, our habits, our

goals and desires. The Christian chooses to think and react like Jesus. The Christian chooses to love the unlovable. The Christian chooses to live for God and others. The Christian chooses compassion over arrogance, generosity over greed, honesty over deception.

This doesn't mean we don't stumble and fall. Even the Christian sometimes chooses poorly. That's why forgiveness has that 70 x 7 number Jesus put on it. But when we are "in Christ," when we become new creations, we ask not is it legal, but is it moral? Not, what is everyone else doing, but what would Jesus do? Not, how does it affect only me, but how does it affect those I do not know, even my enemies?

In his book, Ministry Is A High Calling (Aim Low), Kurt Schuermann tells the story of a first year seminary student who visited a world famous scholar. The scholar's study was filled with bookshelves from floor to fifteen foot ceilings. Ladders were attached to the bookcases to reach the books on the top shelves. The young student asked a typical question: "Wow, look at all these books! Have you read them all?" And the scholar responded profoundly, "Yes, but I stopped a while back because they weren't making me a better person."

If Christ truly makes us a new creation, we will become better persons.

"A New GPS"

The Christian faith enables us to start over, begin again, gives us a new direction, a new GPS. Faced with the selfish nature of our desires and actions, Almighty God reaches down and offers His love and forgiveness. Every human being possesses the opportunity to start over, to cleanse his or her heart and mind of a past dominated by sinful choices. But starting over also signifies a change in direction, in motive, in desire. The Christian's love of God leads him to live like Jesus, seeking to bring his goals, desires, and decisions in line with the One who gave His life for all people. Today, most of us here believe we have started over, that we are new creations in Jesus Christ.

In his book, Reminiscences of an Octogenarian, Bruce Metzger, famous Princeton biblical scholar and editor of the Revised Standard Versions of the Bible lists this oft quoted anonymous question as one of the most noteworthy he came across in his 80 plus years of life and study. This morning, it seeks an answer from each one of us.

"If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

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