

"New and Improved"

Psalm 34:1-8; II Corinthians 5:16-21

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 6, 2016 – 4th Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

About a year ago, with the phase out of Windows XP, we bought a new computer for home with a CORE i5 processor. It's hard to believe that I got into this technology some 25 years ago, and now it seems inconceivable to think of life without this electronic genius at hand. Earlier incarnations of our home computer go back to the Pentium II, the Intel 286, and my first one, the 8088.

That initial computer didn't even have a hard drive, but I could keep an amazing amount of data on a floppy disk like this one—about 1/3 of a megabyte. Here's a typical flash drive today and it will store more than 40,000 of these old disks.

Back in 1990 my old Zenith 8088 was a wonder. Most people couldn't imagine wanting or needing a computer faster than this. Now it would make a good door stop, and that's about all. Technology just keeps on changing. What's great today is behind the times tomorrow.

B. F. Goodrich once led in the development of bias-ply tires. It drove its suppliers to come up with better raw materials, better tire cords, and better designs, and was clearly in the lead among manufacturers in 1976. Yet, three years later, there were almost no bias tires supplied as original equipment on American automobiles. They all came with new and improved radial tires.

If we go back a little further to 1955, the leading maker of radio and tv vacuum tubes was RCA. They were the biggest of ten companies in this business in the U.S. When solid state devices came along, primarily transistors, they didn't take it very seriously. Twenty years later they were completely out of the vacuum tube business, and they never did retool for semi-conductors. Other companies ended up taking their place in a market they once dominated.

Times change and so do the way we do things. Advancement is a byword in the field of science. Advancement is also a major and recurring theme in Scripture. If you spend any time with the Bible you'll find that God's people have always had the opportunity to move forward—to go from bondage to freedom, from wilderness to promised land, from sin to salvation. The Scriptures put forth the idea of "new and improved" long before the advertising industry.

Today's reading from II Corinthians is just such an example, especially in its opening verses: "From now on we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God...."

Let's take a closer look at those words. Paul's "from now on" really refers to the point of conversion rather than when the letter was written.

"From now on we ... " The "we" naturally refers to Paul, but can also be taken to mean any other believer who has had such a life-changing experience as he has had.

"From now on we regard no one from a human point of view ... " No longer, says Paul, do I judge others from the limited perspective of a mortal, but I have new eyes with which to see a person's true worth from God's viewpoint. I understand now what God holds to be important.

What doesn't matter about persons is what comes most readily to the minds of most people: things like race, nationality, money, position, social standing, connections, outward beauty, education. These things may differentiate persons from one another, but they have nothing to do with value. All these externals, Paul would say, disappear as a result of the Cross.

"From now on we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way." Paul admits that he once applied this "human judgment" to Jesus, just like he did to all other men and women.

When Paul hunted down the followers of Jesus, he did so because he considered them to be a deviant sect who followed the teachings of an apostate master. The claims of this supposed Messiah were ended by the humiliation of crucifixion. To Paul formerly, Jesus was a nothing, but a dangerous nothing, whose memory and following needed to be stamped out.

Yet, this was all before that decisive day for Paul on the road to Damascus. Gone from that moment on were the prejudices concerned with Christ's lowly birth, his humble social position, his association with outcasts, his disregard of the Law, his appeal to the marginalized and oppressed. All these former concerns disappeared when Paul came to see "the glory of God in the face of Jesus." All this previous human judgment was thrown aside and replaced with a new understanding. Paul now experienced Jesus as God's chosen one, and he would never be the same again.

"So if anyone is in Christ," (that is, if anyone gives himself over in faith to Jesus) "there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" The man or woman who recognizes Christ as central in life is a new person, so different in fact that it's like they are born again.

Everything that was limiting in the old person is gone. Now there's a new attitude, a new outlook, a new set of standards, a new behavior, a new understanding. One who lives as a disciple of Christ is far better than what she was before, even at her best. The change is radical; it goes to the very roots of a person's being.

And "all this is from God." It is a gift freely given, not dependent on our virtue or goodness. There is nothing that we could do to merit something so important. God graciously gives it to us regardless of our prior lives. God loves us in spite of ourselves.

In all that Paul is describing, God is the active one. It was Paul's conviction that, from his own experience, God had taken the initiative. His change came about because God wanted him to have a new heart. Paul was not the pursuer, but the pursued.

Now when a person gives his life over to Christ, he or she can't be the same again. There is a dividing line between past and present. When Christ becomes the center of our lives,

however, it's still just a beginning. There's always room for improvement, for advancement. We learn daily more of what it is to truly follow. We correct the inadequacies within us. We reach out further and further to meet the needs of others and to share the story of what we have found.

None of us are so perfect that we haven't room to grow. That's both the challenge and joy of our faith. Life wouldn't be very interesting if we got to a point where all of our potential was fully developed. God has planned it so that there is always something ahead for us. We continue to evolve as persons as long as we allow the Spirit to continue active within us.

What goes for individuals also goes for congregations or groups of people. During the Civil Rights struggle of the 60's one woman told Martin Luther King, "We ain't where we want to be; we ain't where we're going to be; but, thank God, we ain't where we was."

One can almost hear the Israelites saying something similar in their journey through the wilderness. They weren't in the Promised Land yet; but, thank God, they weren't back in Egypt either. They had miles and years still remaining, but they were on the go. God was leading them to a new and improved life.

So on this fourth Sunday in Lent, it's timely to remember that God is leading us as well. The Lord sees where we are, affirms that it is good, then says, "Come along. I've got something entirely new to show you. You haven't discovered the half of it yet. Trust me and move your feet. That's all there is to it. But remember, you don't have to improve so that I'll love you; I love you so that you will improve."

So whenever you come across an item on the grocer's shelf which says "new and improved," let that remind you that this applies to your life as well. For each day we can grow a little more, each day we can become a little better, but to do so we have to keep open to the possibility and follow in our Master's steps.