

“A Fresh Start: What Does It Mean to Be ‘In Christ’?” 9/17/17

II Cor. 5:17; John 3:16-18; Luke 25:27-28; Rom. 12:1

We printed a Bible verse on this summer’s Mexico Mission Trip T-shirt- II Cor. 5:17, “*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*” It was our theme verse for the week, and we built our Bible studies around it. My next three sermons are based on this one short verse, because I think it is potentially life-changing for us! You’ll get to know this verse very well, so let’s read it together, “*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*” (II Cor. 5:17)

A fresh start! Some of you are ready for a fresh start. Maybe you’ve lost someone you love, through a break-up, death, or divorce. Maybe you’ve had a set-back or an outright failure at work, or you’re struggling with an addiction or another health issue, or you’re trapped in a relationship that just isn’t working. Maybe you’re wracked with guilt over something you’ve done or failed to do, or perhaps you’re just bored with your life. You need a fresh start!

In this little verse from II Cor., Paul promises a fresh start, a “new creation,” he calls it, where everything old is gone and everything is new. We’ll spend time in the next two weeks trying to figure out exactly what old

stuff is gone and what new stuff has come. But if you want a fresh start, it begins by being “in Christ.” What does that mean? What does it mean to be “in Christ?” It’s clear that not everyone is in Christ; Paul says “if anyone is in Christ...” So, what does it mean to be “in Christ?”

The New Testament uses lots of different words and images to talk about and define being in Christ. Let’s look at three of them and see what we can learn. The first is found at the conclusion of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to see Jesus one night. And, these are probably the most famous words in the Bible! <sup>16</sup>*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”* <sup>17</sup>*“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”* (John 3:16,17) According to John, those who are “in Christ” believe in him.

Now we usually use the word “believe” to mean that we mentally agree with something. If we say we really believe that the Steelers will win this afternoon, what we mean is that we are convinced that they are a better team and will perform better than the Vikings. We are mentally convinced. But the Greek word translated “believe” in John 3 means more than just mental assent. It means to put your trust in something.

When I was a youth director, I used to take kids rappelling. There was a place we'd got to descend an 80 foot cliff on a rope. I'd get a student all tied in to their harness and attach the rope to it. Then I would instruct them to carefully walk backward over the cliff, leaning back as they did so, trusting the rope to support their weight. That's when kids would balk. My instructions went against every instinct they had! They resisted walking backward over a cliff! But the kids needed to put their trust in the rope in order to stay safe. They quickly discovered that if they tried to descend without leaning back and trusting the rope, that they were likely to stumble and lose their balance. They wouldn't fall down the cliff- there are safety systems built into rappelling- but they could easily end up dangling and swinging around out-of-control, and do a face-plant into the cliff! They had to trust in that rope.

That's what the word "believe" means in John's gospel. We trust in Jesus to save us and give us eternal life. We give up trusting our own efforts to impress God- the good things we do, the sins we've given up, or spending hours in prayer, or even attending church! Instead, we trust that Jesus did what we can't do on our own. He paid the price for our sins and restored our relationship with God. Trusting that is part of what it means to be "in Christ."

A second way to look at being “in Christ” is found in Luke 5:27-28.

*<sup>27</sup>After this Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” <sup>28</sup>And Levi got up, left everything, and followed him.* Here, being “in Christ” means following Jesus. Now it would have been very costly for Levi to follow Jesus, for he had a very profitable tax collection business. But that’s what he did. Levi left everything and followed him. And Jesus invited many other people to follow him, too.

In Jesus’ day, people who wanted to really explore God and what God expected of them, would attach themselves to a rabbi, traveling with him, living with him, listening to him, and interacting with him. They would even set aside their work, and perhaps even their family, for the opportunity to become the person God was calling them to be. And that’s exactly the way Jesus worked. He invited people to follow him, learning from his teaching and his example, asking him questions, and watching his miracles. They set aside their own desires and dreams in order to become part of Jesus’ community of followers and to be part of his mission. They were called disciples, or learners. They were “in Christ.”

Our GPC mission statement says this, *“Gettysburg Presbyterian Church believes that God calls us to invite people to faith in Jesus Christ, and equip them to grow as his fully devoted followers. As disciples we:*

*study regularly, pray daily, witness boldly, live faithfully, serve passionately, give generously, and worship weekly.*” Being “in Christ” means being fully devoted followers of Jesus- disciples.

Let’s look at one more image about being “in Christ.” This one is found in Paul’s letter to the Romans. *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*

(Romans 12:1) Everyone who read these words would have known exactly what Paul was referring to for Paul uses a common ancient image to illustrate what it means to be “in Christ,” the image of animal sacrifice. In religions throughout the ancient world, people would offer sacrifices to their gods to appease them or show their gratitude to them or for other specific purposes. Generally, an animal (a bird or lamb or goat or ox) would be slaughtered by a priest, and then roasted or burned, the idea being that the aroma of the burning meat would rise to the god or gods and please them.

Here, Paul takes that image and transforms it. We are not to offer some poor dead animal to God; We are to offer ourselves! We are the ones laid out on the altar, but not as dead sacrifices, but as living servants! We give up any right we have to our own lives, and turn our lives over to God for God to use them for his purposes as he decides. In a real sense,

our lives no longer belong to us, because we are offering them to God as living sacrifices. That's another aspect of what it means to be "in Christ."

So, being "in Christ" means believing, trusting in Jesus. It means following Jesus, and it means offering ourselves for his service. The Bible uses lots of other images about being in Christ, including being born again, being part of God's family, being part of the Body of Christ, and being saved. In the Presbyterian Church we summarize being "in Christ" by saying that we "trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior." Trusting Jesus as our Savior, as the one who saves us from our sin, is what the John 3 passage was about- "*whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life.*" Trusting Jesus as our Lord, as the one who holds authority over us, is reflected in Jesus' invitation, "Follow me," and in Paul's command to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God.

So, I guess the only remaining question is this: Are you "in Christ?" The next two weeks, we'll look at some of the wonderful benefits that come from being "in Christ"- the old passing away and everything becoming new- but the starting point is being "in Christ."

Now I think being "in Christ" happens differently for different people. Some people have a "come to Jesus," born again experience that they can point to as the decisive moment when they started being "in Christ." Others were raised in their families and churches as followers of Jesus, and can

not remember a time when they were not “in Christ.” How you get there isn’t important to us. What’s important is this: Are you “in Christ” now? If you would like to be “in Christ,” to have your sins forgiven and to have direction in your life from the one who created you, you can do that in the next few minutes of silent prayer.

Just tell God that you’d like to trust in his gift of Jesus to pay for your sins. That you would like to follow him. That you would like to offer yourself for God’s service. God will do the rest. Then, tell me about your decision, and we’ll talk about your own next steps. And come back next week to hear about what happens to those who are “in Christ.”