

And ...

1 Peter 1:17-23

May 4, 2014

This is Christ's gracious offer, not continuation, but transformation.

What's the difference?

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What's the difference?

What would it mean for you? To be transformed? To be resurrected? Not merely extending or stretching out your life as it is, but transforming your life, changing it, setting it in a new direction, filling it with new vitality, giving you a new life, giving you eternal life? What is dead in you? What needs to be re-made? What needs to be transformed?

What would it mean for a church? What would it mean for our church? The call to worship written by Judith Jessop is addressed to "The Moribund Church." And "moribund" means? In decline, close to death, stagnant, lacking vitality, not long for this world. Is our church moribund?

In any case, whether it is dying or whether it is at risk of dying or whether it is indeed alive and thriving, what does it mean for our church now, in this very moment, to be offered transformation, not merely continuation, to be offered resurrection, not merely resuscitation? Because if our life as a church is merely prolonged, merely propped up, merely maintained as it is, we will die ... later or sooner.

This is Christ's gracious offer: not continuation, but transformation, not resuscitation, but resurrection. How does it happen?

God does it. It is a gracious offer, an offer of grace.

God does it. We cannot transform ourselves or raise ourselves from death.

God does it. The power of God that raised Jesus Christ from death is now at work in us.

God does it. "Through the living and eternal word of God you have been born again."

That's how Peter put it in his letter to the Christian churches in Asia: "Through the living and eternal word of God you have been born again." "Born again." Not your life, as it is, preserved or protected or prolonged, but you, born again, into a new life, into a new existence, into a wholly new way of being. How? Through the "word of God," not by the power of God, but by the word of God, not by God's might, but by God's word.

Word. Word is a key aspect of who God is. Word, language, speech, meaning. Is that what it means for us to be made in God's image? With words, we make sense of what is beyond us and of what is inside us. Word creates meaning. And with words, we acknowledge each other and make connection with each other. Word creates relationship.

Could love exist without words? Without language, without thoughts, feelings, conscious desire, without a means of expressing thoughts, feelings, and desire?

Could life exist without words? Words form consciousness and consciousness births intention, and intention is enacted in creation. God spoke the worlds into being, and when God acted to save the world, he sent ... the word made flesh.

You have been born again "through the living and eternal word of God."

Through the "eternal" word of God, which does not mean that it is frozen and inert, but that it is lasting, and which does not mean that it is spoken once for all, but that it is spoken again and again to every generation, never losing relevance, never losing power, never losing purpose, never lacking effect.

Through the "living" word of God, which means it is now, not just then. God speaks now, not just then. God is still speaking!

Last Sunday, we began a discussion of the Vision Plan of the National Setting of the United Church of Christ. It is important for us to hear and study this newly enacted Vision Plan and to make it our own, not because it is a prescription for the work of the Church as a whole and for all Christians, because the United Church of Christ is not THE church, but only one small part of it, but because this is our part of the Church, our distinct part of the Church, and because God has called us together in the United Church of Christ to say and do something important for the sake of all.

Last week, we looked at the “Core Purpose” of the national setting of the United Church of Christ:

Drawn together by the Holy Spirit, we are a distinct and diverse community of Christians that come together as one church, joining faith and action. In covenant with the church in all of its settings, we serve God in the co-creation of a just and sustainable world as made manifest in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We serve God in the co-creation of a just and sustainable world. We are partners with God in the business of transformation, in the business of resurrection.

This purpose is guided by three “Core Values.” A business defines its way of doing business by its core values: putting the customer first or offering an unconditional guarantee, providing exceptional service or insuring the highest quality. In the same way, we define our way of being church by the values on which we put highest priority. The three “Core Values” enumerated in the United Church of Christ Vision Plan are these: “Continuing Testament,” “Extravagant Welcome,” and “Changing Lives.” These are the values, the beliefs, the habits that enable our work as partners with God in the business of transformation and resurrection. Today, we will take a closer look at the first of these core values: “Continuing Testament.”

We put priority on a continuing testament. We have the Old Testament, and the New Testament, and ...?

In the beginning, God spoke the worlds into being, and, in these latter days, God has spoken to us through his Son, and ...?

We are being transformed, born again, made new, in this present moment, by the living word of God, but a living word is spoken by a living God. Why would a living God be silent? Why would a living, speaking God have nothing left to say? Wouldn't you find that odd?

Our insistence in the United Church of Christ that God is still speaking is confirmation of our belief in a God who is there, a God who is alive and active and speaking and doing, right here, right now! We do remember and value what God has spoken, in the past, to prophets and apostles, but we listen too for what God is speaking, right now, to us!

We put priority on a continuing testament. Testament means covenant, a relationship sealed by mutual promises, so a continuing testament is an ongoing covenant. The relationship between God and God's people, us, is

being renewed and remade in every generation. It is a unfinished covenant, a living relationship, growing and changing and enlarging all the time.

What doesn't change is this, what has been true from the beginning and will always be true, that the initiative in this relationship comes from God. It is always about grace. We are in partnership with God because God invites us and because God makes it possible.

It is a continuing testament. The word "testament" is also related to the word "testimony." A continuing testament is an ongoing testimony, an ongoing witness. The Old Testament is a witness to the words and works of God. The New Testament is a witness to the words and works of God, and ...?

God is still working, God is still speaking, so there is an ongoing witness, a continuing testament, to the words and works of God among us. If the people of this world are to see evidence of the living God, it will not only be by reading this book, but also by looking at us: "Your light must shine, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven."

This is our first core value: continuing testament. "Our faith is 2000 years old." At least! "Our thinking is not." Our thinking, our perspectives, our attitudes, our ways are not "old school," not stuck in the past, not mired in outdated traditions, but fresh, relevant, cutting edge. Because? Because God is still speaking!

God is still speaking. But if God is still speaking, what is our job?

To listen!

We will die if we are content with merely holding on, preserving the traditions of our ancestors, guarding the faith we have inherited, doing our best to keep this institution as it is living and breathing for as long as we can. If we want to live, we have to listen to the God who is still speaking. If we want to live, we have to live, to be always changing, becoming, being transformed.

This is Christ's gracious offer: not continuation, but transformation, not resuscitation, but resurrection. I told you during Epiphany that we were not done with Francis. I read an interesting article this week entitled, "The Pope in the Attic," discussing the most unusual situation of having two living popes, Benedict and Francis living in such close proximity, two popes with such contrasting styles and -- might we say? -- with such contrasting core values. Benedict is about constructing a strong and precise and clearly-defined "wall" wall around the faith, while Francis is about exploring the edges, going past the limits, seeking out the people for whom the good news is good news.

Benedict is about defending, Francis about witnessing, Benedict about protecting, Francis about inviting.

Their chosen names are most apt, because their namesakes reflect this same difference. Benedict is known for his rule, for organization, for order, while Francis is ... out there! Francis simply listens, listens simply, to what Jesus says ... and does it!

In the United Church of Christ, we choose to take Francis' path, listening to a God who is still speaking, and following Jesus ... wherever!