

THE NEW CREATION

(Last in a series on Creation)

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"Therefore, if any one is in Christ, one is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come." II Corinthians 5: 17.

A good many of you, I suspect, have shared at one time in something called a "brainstorming session." You sat in a group where people were urged to come up with new ideas for their organization. People were encouraged to feel free about throwing out ideas no matter how fantastic they sounded and not to worry about whether their suggestions seemed to be workable. After all these fantastic ideas were listed out on drop sheets, the leader then asked the group to look at the ideas critically and to select those which they felt might be put into action.

The man who originated the brainstorming concept was a businessman named Alex Osborn, who summed up his theories about creative thinking in a book called, Applied Imagination in 1953. Among other things Osborn held that when people are trying to come up with new ideas, they need to let their imaginations work freely and to suspend judgment as to whether their ideas will work or not. For if you get critical too soon, you put a damper on the creative juices. Moreover, projects that look impossible at first glance may turn out upon analysis to prove supremely practical. The time does come, however, when we do need to look critically at what we have dredged up out of our imaginations. Then, wrote Osborn:

"We should be as cold in our criticism as we have been warm in our enthusiasm."

Now it has occurred to me that when God undertook that great brainstorming operation which led to the creation of the world, God neglected to read portions of Mr. Osborn's book. God did very well with the first step, the one involving what Osborn called, "creative thinking." Beginning completely from scratch God came up with things on the drop sheets that never would have occurred to you or me: duck-billed platypusses, anteaters, banyan trees. God even came up with the fantastic notion of something known to science as homo sapiens. The divine enthusiasms ran free.

However, God did not do so well when it came to the second basic step in the brainstorming process. Here one must exercise what Osborn called, "judicial thinking." God should have realized that not everything on the drop sheets of eternity would work out in the nitty gritty of time and place. Duck-billed platypusses might work out. Anteaters might work out. But human beings were pie in the sky. When God went to the board room with this idea the angels should have been as cold in their criticism as they had been warm in their enthusiasm. Instead they let the creator foist an Edsel on the world.

And if these speculations of mine sound too fantastic, let it be noted that after observing how things were working out, God did have second thoughts.

"The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. Genesis 6: 5-6.

Now the Bible story almost ended right there. The fact that it didn't is perhaps the greatest surprise in history. What the Bible seems to be saying is that despite an initial error in judgment, God decides to keep the human experiment going. God allows Noah and his family to keep on producing Edsels.

If you ask me why, I shall have to admit that I am largely at a loss for an answer. Motivation is mystery. I can't even figure out why my wife does certain

things, much less God. It may be that there is a stubborn streak in God, who, as the majority shareholder in this business, can quite literally tell any dissenters on the board to go to hell. Or it may be as I have suggested in the past that God possesses a special sort of faith in humanity. Whatever the reason, one of the most important ideas the Bible has to teach us about God and Creation is that God won't give up. God is determined to make the best of that two-legged creature with illusions of grandeur.

But to put matters that way is to say something rather different from saying that God has decided to settle for things as they are. On the contrary, the whole Bible tells us that God will not settle for the world the way it is. God is determined to make the best of us and that is something quite different from the way we are today.

Which is to say that God isn't finished with us yet. When I spoke a few weeks ago on the image of God, I said that in the New Testament this idea is linked to the idea of a new creation. The Apostle Paul, especially, pictures Christ as bringing the human image of God to light and offering us the opportunity to grow into that image. Therefore, while in one sense the image of God is something we start out with, in another sense, that image is a goal. So, in their book on the United Church Statement of Faith, Roger Shinn and Daniel Williams wrote:

"The image of God is not only the structure of our past and present, but the form of our destiny. Man is the unfinished creation and the Christian hope is that every child of God will be transformed into the likeness of Christ, the true image of God."

That sounds very abstract and theological. But behind such statements lies something very personal. For what Christ taught and his apostles after him is that God is ready to give every person a new start. God desires to enable every person to start out in a fresh direction toward the realization of that divine image. Jesus lived this message by going out of his way to show that even those people who seemed to have no hope at all could receive new hope--sick people, handicapped people, crazy people, poor people, rich people, foreign people, prostitutes, violent people, white collar criminals. There wasn't anyone who might not experience a new birth and become a new creation by the grace of God.

Paul, who was one of the people who experienced that grace, described what it meant to him and what it could mean to others when he wrote:

"Therefore, if any one is in Christ, one is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."

How does the new come? That is too big a question for one sermon. But there is one part of the answer that I would leave with you today, and that is that new creations come through new relationships.

This is a basic truth about human beings. I may illustrate it by referring to a certain motion picture that I have mentioned before. Some years ago we had a small discussion group in the church which was talking about the idea of revelation. I amused the group by telling them how revelation came to me while watching a movie with my mother when I was a small boy. It wasn't a revelation about God; it was a revelation about Greta Garbo. But then was not Garbo divine?

Viewing this film again I realized that it had even more theological significance than I originally thought. Not only does it illustrate the idea of revelation, but also the theme of the new creation. The movie depicts the encounter between a grim, fanatical, no-nonsense Russian Communist, played by Greta Garbo and a French play-boy count, performed by Melvin Douglas. The pivotal scene, which Greta Garbo told the director she did not think she could play, is one in which Ninotchka suddenly

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bursts into a paroxysm of laughter. In that instant every comet that sails the Milky Way comes shooting across the screen. It was at that point in the movie that so long ago my mother turned to me in the darkness of the theatre and said, "See how beautiful she is when she laughs!" And I, though only a child, felt I had prophetic powers and understood all mysteries and all knowledge. Here, indeed, was revelation.

But what matters for the plot of the movie is that from that point on Ninotchka becomes a different person. The count is no saint, far from it. But through her relationship with this man Ninotchka begins to appreciate other values in life and the count himself is somewhat redeemed. I believe that in the end he even goes to work.

In human experience new creations usually occur as the result of some positive relationship with another person. In a more profound way that is how the new creation happens of which Paul speaks.

God's design for making the best of us is to send into our midst someone to whom we can relate unreservedly in love and trust. God's answer is to relate to us in Jesus Christ. Paul found personally that by surrendering himself to Christ in simple faith, he was put into touch with the infinite, renewing power of God. To be "in Christ," he said, was to become "a new creation." That didn't mean that one became perfect all of a sudden. Paul wasn't perfect. It didn't mean that one instantaneously achieved the goal of one's creation. "I haven't attained the goal," Paul wrote elsewhere, "but I press on toward it." To be a new creation meant that one established this new relationship with Christ that set one on the way.

That in a nutshell was what Paul wanted to share with the world. It was this renewing experience that made him, as he put it, an "ambassador". He saw in Christ, God's brainstorm for getting human beings back on the right track. Here was a visionary scheme that God took off the drop sheets and put to work in flesh and blood. In Christ God was present and active right here in the world, reconciling the world to God. We can be part of that scheme, said Paul, if we just believe in what God is doing, if we just trust.

So then Adam is not the last word in the Creation story. Nor Cain. Christ is the last word. And through Christ, so are we, with whom God is never finished.

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