

Scriptures: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Galatians 6:1-18

Healing, Freedom, and Newness

In 2 Kings 5, we hear the story of Naaman – a mighty commander, successful and esteemed, but suffering from leprosy. Though clothed in prestige and privilege, he bore a hidden shame. His journey to healing was humbling. Dipping seven times in the muddy waters of the Jordan River, following the command of a prophet from a foreign land. In his obedience – his surrender – he came up cleansed physically – and also spiritually renewed. His flesh was “restored like the flesh of a young boy,” (2 Kg. 5:14). He was a new creation.

In today’s world, many of us come to God like Naaman – we carry burdens others can’t see. We long for restoration. We want to be made new. And Paul, writing to the Galatians, says that through Christ, that’s exactly what God does. Not through the works of the law or outward signs like circumcision, but through the power of Christ alone. “What counts is the new creation,” (Gal. 5:16).

This message hits home as we wrap up all the Independence Day festivities from Friday. Our Founding Fathers – flawed as they were – believed in something beyond themselves. Many of them leaned on Scripture and sought liberty for themselves and for generations to come. Paul the Apostle speaks of a greater freedom than even political revolution. He talks about the freedom found in Jesus Christ, who makes all things new. That’s what we’re talking about this morning, so if you have a Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Galatians 6, we’re going to read the whole chapter. **Read Galatians 6:1-18.**

Restoring One Another in the Spirit of Gentleness

Our passage begins with a plea from Paul, “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted,” (Gal. 6:1). As the Church, we should pay attention to this. Paul doesn’t tell us to shame, shun, or guilt-trip the sinner. He says to restore. In Greek, the word is *katartizo* and it was a word they used in terms of medicine or of fishing. It means “mending, or repairing,” like setting a broken bone, or mending a fishing net. Restoration takes care, compassion, and closeness.

This is a good reminder for us. We live in a “cancel culture” society. Harsh judgment often reigns, resulting in broken relationships. Instead, Paul teaches that Christian community shouldn’t be marked by pride or legalism, but by humble correction and mutual support. He states, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ,” (verse 2).

Think again about the founders of our country. They bore each other's burdens to forge a new country – debating, failing at times, disagreeing, but always pressing onward. Yet even their efforts pale in comparison to what the body of Christ is called to do. The Declaration of Independence says that “all men” – and we interpret that to mean all people today – “are created equal.” The Gospel goes even further. In Christ, all people are made new.

Freedom to Sow What Really Matters

Paul gives a pretty stern warning partway through our text. He says, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life,” (verses 7-8). We reap what we sow. He's not only talking about external actions – he's also pointing to where we plant our trust. Do we sow to the flesh – seeking prestige, privilege, comfort, self-sufficiency? Or to the Spirit – cultivating love, generosity, and truth?

Naaman almost missed his healing because of his pride. In his anger, he said:

I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed? (2 Kgs. 5:11-12).

In Naaman's mind, he deserved more than a common river, and a common prophet. Until his servants spoke up and reminded him, if the prophet had asked for something grand, wouldn't he have done it? And so, Naaman humbled himself and obeyed. And God worked the miracle! The same holds true for us. Healing, transformation, and freedom doesn't come through power or position, but through faith in God's direction – in ways, oftentimes, that seem foolish or simple in our view.

Look what Paul says next. “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers,” (Gal. 6:9-10). Independence Day should be a reminder to us that liberty isn't sown in comfort. The founders risked their lives to break free from England. One of them, Richard Stockton, I mentioned to our siblings at the Alpha Center the other night, lost everything he had after he was arrested by the British and died in poverty. Why would anyone do that? Our nation's founders had a dream of building something better. In Christ, we're called to do even more – to sow seeds of grace – to live in freedom that doesn't serve self, but that builds others up.

Boasting Only in the Cross

Paul writes, “See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!” (verse 11). By the time he wrote his epistles he was pretty old. He had a scribe that he dictated much of his writings to, who then delivered them to the churches. He was losing his eyesight. But apparently, he finishes this writing in his own hand. His letters are larger than the scribe’s who had been writing to this point. Paul makes a couple key points here regarding the divisions which were tearing the church apart in Galatia.

Paul writes,

Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh, (verses 12-13).

See, they were fussing about having to go through all the Old Testament ritual things of becoming a Jew to become a Christian – because that’s what some of them thought, and wanted people to do. Paul says they don’t have to do that. Apparently some of them must’ve been keeping tabs on how many Gentiles they’d gotten to convert to Christianity through Judaism, and were bragging about it. In response, Paul states, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world,” (verse 14).

We live in a world that praises achievement, status, and reputation. Paul turns all of it upside-down. He doesn’t boast in credentials, or success, not even in moral righteousness – but in the cross – a symbol of suffering, shame, and surrender. Why? Because the cross is the gateway to new creation. Through it, the world’s been crucified to us, and we to the world. In Christ, the old self dies, a new life begins – not bound by culture or law, not defined by human categories or systems, but equipped and animated by the Holy Spirit.

Think again for a moment of Naaman. A powerful man, from a powerful country, who had to listen to a foreign servant girl, visit an enemy country, and obey a prophet who didn’t even bother coming to the door to see him. Only then did healing come. When it came, it was deeper than skin – it was the beginning of a new identity. Paul’s message to the Galatians is summed up here. It’s not about outward signs, or religious performance. It’s about inner transformation. “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation,” (verse 15), Paul tells us.

Peace and Mercy to the People of God

Paul closes with a blessing: “Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule – to the Israel of God,” (verse 16). He doesn’t mean the Jews, or Israel ethnicity. He means all the people of God who live by faith. The spiritual descendants of Abraham, born again through Christ. That’s us, friends!

He adds, “From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus,” (verse 17). Paul probably had scars from beatings and persecutions for following Jesus Christ. He’s basically saying, “I’ve suffered for this Gospel. I’ve lived it. I carry visible, physical evidence. My life preaches this message.” On Independence Day, we often remember those who bore the marks of war – the wounds, the losses, the scars. We honor their sacrifice.

But friends, in the body of Christ – the Church – we’re not called to simply honor sacrifice. We’re called to enter it. To share in the sufferings of Christ so we may also share in His resurrection. To lay down our lives – not for the flag, as great as it is – but for the kingdom of God. His kingdom begins now – in the new creation God is forming within each of us. And it will only be completed when Christ returns, and we are made whole forever.

A New Creation is Everything!

Let’s think for a moment about what this “new creation” looks like in practical terms. It looks like forgiveness, in a world which demands revenge. It looks like gentleness, in a season of rage and anger. It looks like generosity, in a society and culture fixated on the acquisition of more and more possessions. It looks like humility, when pride is generally praised.

The “new creation” looks like hope, when despair seems more realistic. The Gospel which Paul speaks of to the Galatians is not about escaping the world. It’s about transforming it. This is what they’re talking about in the mission statement of the United Methodist Church, “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” And the vision statement was updated this spring to go along with the mission, “The United Methodist Church forms disciples of Jesus Christ who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously in local communities and worldwide connections.”

Like Naaman, we may show up with our own preconceptions, and our own ideas of how God should work. The Church in America today is filled with a lot of Naamans. And when God doesn’t do things the way they think He ought to, they fall away. God invites us to something deeper – He’s not focused on the legalistic stuff that we are. I can’t count how many times I’ve heard people say things to the effect, “I don’t deserve to have these things

happen to me, I'm a good person." No, you're not! We aren't good people. It's like the songwriter once sang, "The only thing that's good in me is You, Jesus." Only Jesus is good – and He died for it, and to rescue us! Only through surrender, through obedience, through faith – are we made new, and it's all to bring glory to God!

Carrying the Marks of Christ

There were a lot of people celebrating Independence Day on Friday evening. I hope they spent some of their time remembering the sacrifices made to give us freedom. And I hope they considered that our political freedom is not the ultimate freedom. As important as it is, our politics and politicians will never save our souls.

John Adams, second American President, once said, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." He understood that freedom, untethered from morality, becomes chaos. George Washington, in his farewell address said, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports." The Founders knew – imperfectly, but even still – that freedom requires something more than liberty. It requires transformation, and inner renewal.

Or, as Paul would say, it requires "new creation." The greatest freedom we have today isn't political. It's spiritual. Christ has set us free from sin and death. In Him, we are no longer slaves to fear, or pride, or performance. We're beloved children of God – and through Him, we are a new creation!

Paul ends the epistolary letter to Galatia with a benediction, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen," (verse 18). That's my prayer for us today. May His grace be with our spirits. May we boast in nothing but the cross. May we bear each other's burdens. May we not grow weary in doing good. And may we always remember, "what counts is the new creation!"

Prayer: Gracious God, Thank You for the freedom we enjoy in this country, for those who labored and sacrificed to make it possible. But even more, thank You for the freedom we have in Christ – the freedom from sin, shame, and the fear of death. Make us new by Your Spirit. Teach us to bear each other's burdens with gentleness. Lead us to sow to the Spirit, and not to the flesh. May we never boast in anything but the cross, and may Your peace and mercy rest upon us, Your new creation. In the strong name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.