

The New You

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: When my girls were teenagers, they would sometimes watch on TV certain makeover programs. You know, the kind of shows on which they take an unremarkable looking woman who is clearly not too concerned with her appearance and whose idea of high fashion reaches up to the lofty height of baggy sweatpants and a faded T-shirt, and they go to work on her. They throw away her old wardrobe and show her how to buy outfits that compliment her. They do her hair up in a way that brings out the best features of her face. They show her how to properly apply makeup. And shazzam! By the time they're done with her, they've turned Plain Jane into a real beauty.

In today's Epistle, the Apostle Paul discusses a similar transformation – except that that change he describes is vastly more radical. It's more like taking a half mad bag lady with her shopping cart stolen from Wal-Mart; who hasn't bathed or brushed her rotten, mostly missing teeth in years; whose hair is matted with greasy filth and infested with lice; who has but one outfit: an ill-fitting housedress, soiled, tattered, threadbare; who emits an odor so foul that it causes passersby to wretch uncontrollably; whose lungs are diseased and whose liver is shot – taking an old crone like that and turning her into a young, healthy, vibrant, charming, final contestant for the Miss Universe Contest. It's a transformation that is absolutely miraculous.

Of course, Paul is not talking about an outward transformation; he's talking about an inner change: one that's deep and spiritual and not merely physical and superficial. Writing to the Christians at Ephesus (and to us through them), he tells what they once were: Godless Gentiles, ignorant of the truth, with darkened minds and hard hearts; given entirely over to greed, unwholesome lusts, and vile passions; alienated from the life of God, and heading straight to hell. Many of the adjectives he chooses carry the ideas of decay and the foul odor that accompanies it. In other words, you stank. You were like a rotting corpse. You were repulsive to God. That's what you *were*.

His point, though, is you are not that way anymore. Having learned of Christ, having come to faith in him and his Gospel, having been baptized in his name, there is a new you. *God* has made a new you – a new you in whom he delights, a new you with whom for Christ's sake he is well pleased. In view of this, Paul says, *be the new you*. Don't be the old you. Be the Miss Universe finalist. Don't be the bag lady. You actually have a choice. To be sure, every moment of every day you can decide which one you will be; which one you will put on and present to the world at large and more especially to your fellow believers in Christ, those to whom you are united as a living member of his one body.

But what exactly are we talking about here? Let's spell it out: the old, sinful you that God finds so disgusting is totally absorbed with itself and what it thinks is good for it. That you wants what it wants when it wants it. That you seeks personal happiness and self pleasure. That you is all about you and isn't particularly concerned about others except to the extent that they can do something for you – be it serve you, make you feel good about yourself or superior to them, or otherwise gratify you in some way. And the thing is, the old you can't help it. It's the way it is by nature – the sinful nature, that is – and so when it does what it does, the old you is only doing what comes naturally. It is incapable of thinking or acting otherwise. Even when it does what outwardly appears to be something good or kind for someone else, it does it for a selfish reason.

The new you that God has created – raised up within you by the power of Christ's resurrection – *that* you is the opposite of the old you. The new you lives not for self, but for others. It seeks to serve them. It seeks to please them. It seeks to fill their needs. It seeks to resolve problems and correct errors and end conflicts without counting the cost to itself. The new you is, in short, Christ-like. That you is, after all, made in his image. It is therefore kind and patient and gentle and willing to endure, to suffer, and even to die for the good of others.

And so it's not hard at all for you to determine which you is operating at any particular moment. All you've got to do is ask, why am I doing this (or thinking this or saying this)? Is it to serve me in some way? Or is to serve someone else or others? If the answer is to serve me, then you know it's the old you in command, in which case you know you've got a problem. So what do you do? Paul says you put off the old self; that is, you recognize that what you're up to is a sin, a stinking offense to God and hurtful to the body of Christ, and you confess it. Then, receiving Christ's forgiveness and the power of his Spirit to renew your mind, you put on the new you, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Now, this does not mean that you never do anything for yourself or ever enjoy any pleasures. No, part of serving others is taking care of yourself. But that's just it: the reason you take care of yourself is to enable you better to serve. If you're married, for example, you want to be healthy and fit and attractive because that enables you better to serve in your role as a husband or wife.

Okay, having laid down the general principle of putting off the old self and putting on the new you, Paul gets to some specifics. He says, "having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one body." That's simple enough: if words come out of your mouth, they should be true words – and you should know for certain that they are true before you speak them. So, you won't be passing on gossip or stories about others in which you try to get inside their heads and explain their motives, because the truth is you don't know their motives. But why are most lies told? They are told to hide guilt, to make excuses, or to justify bad behavior. That's the old you. The new you confesses guilt, accepts blame, and never justifies bad behavior.

Next Paul says, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil." The sense of it is having been made angry, do not sin. Anger is an appropriate response to sin and injustice. God gets angry; but he does so without sin. And sure as the sun rises, in this fallen world people are going to make you angry at times. When that happens, you want your anger to be like God's which has three distinct traits. It is first of all just. It is directed against a clear violation of God's Law that is causing hurt or harm to someone. It is secondly slow to arise. It puts up with and suffers a lot before it goes off; and when it does, it expresses itself in proper measure and with restraint. It doesn't exaggerate or suddenly explode in a fiery blast of fury. And it is thirdly short-lived. After appropriate corrections are made, it is quick to forgive and to forget. It doesn't nurse grudges.

And that's why Paul says not to let the sun go down on your anger. If there's a problem that needs to be dealt with, deal with it. Resolve the issue. Settle the thing. Confront and reconcile with whoever by their sin made you angry. To fail to do so is to open the door to the devil who delights in smoldering feuds and feelings of resentment which lead in turn to thoughts and acts of revenge. These have no place in the body of Christ and must be prevented. And the new you can do that.

Moving on, Paul says “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.” Obviously stealing is wrong, a violation of the seventh commandment. But not all stealing is obvious. Insurance fraud, cheating on taxes, receiving public assistance or disability when one could be working, these too are forms of theft. But notice the motivation Paul puts forward. Someone who works is serving his neighbor twice: first by the work itself which accomplishes something good, and secondly to earn money that can be used in part to assist those who genuinely cannot work or have needs beyond their ability to provide for.

And the old you knows yet other ways to steal. It is stealing to take the time you owe to others. It is stealing to hide your talents so that you won't be called upon to use them. It is stealing to see a problem that you could correct, but you don't because you decide to leave it for someone else to do. The new you gives of self. It gives of its time and its talents. It doesn't take of others what they don't freely offer.

Next Paul says, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouth, but only such as is good for the building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” Earlier Paul called for truthfulness; but not everything that's true should be spoken. Words need to be weighed first. Will saying this help? Will it encourage someone or help them in some way? Will saying it increase unity and harmony in the body of Christ? Or will saying it hurt? Will it tear down someone's reputation? Will it create division or discord? And is it being directed to the right audience? Let's use a highly unlikely example to make the point. I know this is hard to imagine, but pretend that you don't like the way I preach. Sermons are too long, boring, and irrelevant. So, what do you do? Grouse to others about my failures to preach properly? How does that help? No, you come to me with suggestions for improving my work. (In my mind's eye I can already see the line forming outside the church office.) I think you get the point.

Paul continues, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” I believe this to be a catch all which includes all that follows. What grieves the Spirit? Disunity and discord in the body of Christ: bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander and malice between members of the Church – all that belongs to the old you. What pleases the Spirit? The new you, who is kind and compassionate and who freely forgives the offenses of others, as God in Christ forgave you.

And finally Paul says, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us”. It sounds like a high bar to reach, to imitate God; but you know how children naturally look like their parents. They should: they have the same DNA. The new you has God's DNA: his Holy Word written on your heart. At all times choose to be the new you and then do what comes naturally and you will be like your Father and his Son and his Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!