

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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2 Cor 5:11-21

"Made New"

Rev. Peter Gomes, who served the Harvard Memorial Church as pastor to "the best and the brightest" for over 30 years, was asked in early retirement the meaning of "the good news" that he had preached so energetically. Gomes said embracing Christianity means that "you don't have to be as you are," but he also added, "we can't rely on things always being the way they are."

I think Gomes has it right: change is *possible*, and change is *inevitable*. One way or the other, this is a "new year!" Some people long for the personal transformation they are told is possible in Jesus Christ. They know too well the failures in their lives, and don't want to keep living that way. But how to get out of where they are? At the other end of the spectrum, some people are all too satisfied with the way things are, and see no need to change, indeed they resist it. They dislike what's new, because it disturbs what is - which is very pleasant, from their place in life! But new things do come, like it or not!

1) All Things New

Some people say that Christianity is inherently conservative and largely unchanging, because it is based on historical events, and it has to guard the "deposit of truth." But God is also "the God of the new." He says "I am doing a new thing, do you not perceive it?" (Is 43); his oft-stated goal is to

bring in "the new heavens and the new earth;" (Is 65,66; 2 Pet 3, Rev 21), and along the way he promises a *new covenant, a new spirit, a new heart, a new self, a new way; new birth, new life, new wine*. And when the Son of God became human, his story became known as "the good news" - the gospel of Jesus Christ. *New* is "God's middle name!"

So when the Apostle Paul tried to capture what becoming a Christian meant in the 1st century, he said "If anyone is in Christ, he is a *new creation; the old has gone, the new has come*" (2 Cor 5:17). Or as Peter Gomes said in 21st century language, "you don't have to be as you are." Both the Apostle and the pastor are talking to would-be believers, half-way believers, skeptics, new Christians, people embedded in a culture that does not believe, think or act Christianly. In both cases, the message is "you don't have to conform to your culture - in fact, as a Christian, you shouldn't." Greco-Roman paganism of the 1st century and "the pursuit of the American dream" in the 21st are both non-Christian in all too many ways!

So *becoming new* is always a Christian goal. Settling for what we have is never right. Thinking we can hold on to what we have is an illusion - as Gomes said, "we can't rely on things always being the way they are." So among the changes this year will bring, what will happen to us? What will we become?

2) A New Mind

God has dozens of “new things” on his agenda; let me mention two. First is what Romans 12 and Ephesians 4 call “*the renewal of your mind.*” That refers not to our intellectual processes, but to what is also called *our spirit, our heart*; the source of who we are, our self-image, our motivating center.

The Christian gospel can change the inner core of our being for the better. Jonathan Edwards, the theologian of the Great Awakening, said this was the core issue: if we claim to be Christian, or to be revived or awakened, has it changed our “*affections*”? Has the gospel of Jesus and the work of the Spirit penetrated to where our decisions are formed, to the place where we store the things we most value? *What do we want deep inside us?*

For some of us, that’s power. We need to stay in control; it scares us when things are out of control. So we struggle to arrange things, to arrange people, to perform the way we want. We are, in modern jargon, “control freaks.” We need order, and power. The Gospel says that God is in control of our lives and his world. Others of us are the opposite; we crave attention and affection, and we will trade anything just to be liked. When we are slighted, we are hurt; when we are insulted, we are crushed; when we are ignored, we wither away. So we push to get attention; we over-achieve, searching for applause; we submit, seeking affection. Our need to be needed is the main story of our lives. The Gospel says the love of Jesus is the mainstay of the Christian’s life.

Still others want peace at any price; so we give way to our spouses, our children, our parents, our bosses, rather than risk confrontation. We hate conflict; we are insecure and almost neurotic in protecting

our self-esteem; we get angry at people who threaten the good image we have of ourselves. The Gospel says acceptance by God brings Christians inner peace. Of course most of us are a mixture of these and other “personality types” at different times. But if we’re honest, I think most of us would like to be made new in some of these areas! Get your mind renewed, says the Gospel. Don’t conform to your culture’s definitions of a good life. Let God’s Spirit reshape your mind, your spirit, your affections. The best modern equivalent to these old words is probably *motives*. So here’s a test of Christian transformation: has the Gospel changed, or is it changing, our motives? That’s something to think about in the new year!

3) The New Self

When your motives are being renewed by the Gospel, according to Paul, your way of life will also change. It will be like “putting off” an old set of clothes that no longer suit you, and “putting on” a new set that befits your new life (Col 3, Eph 4). It will be “*a makeover*”!

A Christian mind with renewed motives means outer behavior is renewed. This is, to be sure, the work of God’s Spirit, but it is also a conscious act of our own renewed will. So Christians are called to put off anger, envy, hard-heartedness, self-indulgence; and to put on truthfulness, kindness, forbearance, forgiveness.

False views of reality lead to confusion, wrong desires, and disappointment; minds renewed with God’s truth produce virtues. The “new self” in its “new clothes” reflects the “new mind” and “new motives” within. We have to “dress the part” that befits our calling. And if we do, everyone we know will be happier. Because there is a desperate need for better husbands, better wives, better workers, better people to work with, better

neighbors, better people to be around. Self-improvement techniques won't get us there; these are *virtues* that can be expressed in all relationships once we no longer have to "feed the beast within" – the one that used to crave and devour power or attention or peace or respect at the expense of anyone or anything else.

4) *How To Be New*

How do we *do* these things? How can we be renewed in our minds and in our selves?

You recall that Paul wrote "*If anyone is in Christ,*" he is a new creation. How do we ensure that *we are "in Christ"*? How can we become more-so? First, have we ever "bowed the knee," and said "Lord, I now understand and accept why Jesus died - to make reconciliation with you possible for people like me – in fact, for me! I accept and embrace what Jesus has done, and pray that he will make me new from the inside."

If we are already "in Christ" - Paul's shorthand for being "united with Christ by faith," "filled with the Spirit of Christ," – if "Christ lives in us and we live in him," then how can we deepen that union? Two ideas, each with two parts.

First: this year, every day, (a) *listen to God* and (b) *speak to God*. That is, every day, read your Bible and pray! I know everyone is busy, but we can all do this. Some of you read all or most of the Bible last year in the edition we gave away at Christmas. This year get a Daily Bible Reading Guide (we give away one called *TODAY*) and find ten minutes after you get up, over your coffee, when the kids have gone, at your desk, in some corner at lunchtime... ten minutes to hear what God is saying to you, and to pray to him about your own needs, your family, whatever. Use our "Yellow Book" called *Prayers Of The Church* to help you.

Second point: this year *become more fully a part of Christ's Body* – the community of faith, the Church. So (a) *find a small group* to be part of – a Bible Study, a prayer group, the choir, the Men's Fellowship, the Women's Guild, the Wednesday Fellowship, the Sunday School team, the Trustees' pool of workers. You will get to know fellow Christians, and your faith will grow. And (b) start doing something *that directly helps other people*: work in a thrift store, a food pantry, a soup kitchen, tutoring, teaching ESL, bringing food and clothes to homeless people; visiting nursing homes or hospitals. It will renew your life to help others with theirs.

You will learn more what it means to be "in Christ," and renewal will occur in your life. And whether change comes because you want it to, or because it's unavoidable, you will become a better Christian through it all...

Let us pray.