INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday I saw someone that I hadn't seen in at least a year. I noticed that Frank had lost some weight. So I inquired. Was he OK? Yes, he said. Frank had lost about 30 pounds and was feeling really good. Frank told me that, after his heart attack several years ago, he had changed his ways. Frank started doing the evening cooking. Not that his wife was a bad cook, mind you. But Frank had a more-vested interest in changing their eating habits. So he started cooking in more healthful ways. Less frying. Less rich sauces. More vegetables. Smaller portions. Frank told me that he really enjoyed the challenge of cooking this way. During his workday, he'd think about what healthy thing he would like to cook for dinner that night. Then, every day after work, he'd go to the grocery store and purchase the ingredients before going home to begin his creation. As Frank told me all this, I could see that the focus of his pleasure had shifted from eating food to the creativity involved in preparing food. Each day's creative cooking challenge was what gave him an opportunity to make his post-heart-attack body into a new creation.

"A new creation" is the subject of today's scripture lesson from 2 Corinthians. There, the Apostle Paul writes that everyone who is a Christian believer gets a fresh start. Let's take a look at chapter five and see how it's possible for us to become and help bring about a new creation.

1. FROM GOD

First of all, we can celebrate the fact that a new creation comes from God. We see this plainly in verse 18, where Paul writes, "All this is from God." Whatever second chances we're given in life are a result of God's mercy and grace. Whatever new beginnings we have are a gift
from our divine creator, who made us the first time and is willing to reshape us after we have
distorted and misshapen ourselves. Whatever do-overs we are allowed come to us from God, who
re-forms us in love. Whatever opportunities that exist for us to back up and start again are given by
God, who takes our upside-down, inside-out lives, and turns them back the way they were meant to
be. God gives us a new chance. God is the author, sponsor, and promoter of every new creation.

It's a good thing for us that God is the source of the new creation. Think if it were just up to
us. Sure, some of us have will power sometimes. But we certainly don't have it all the time. We'd
be hard pressed to bring about a new creation all on our own. But when we know we have someone
really big rooting for us, that makes a lot of difference. When we know we have someone who
cares supremely, that's a tremendous encouragement. When we know we have someone in our
corner who is providing us bountiful resources, then what excuse do we have not to try? When we
know that God knows all our secrets, then we feel more accountable. All that divine connection
makes a huge impact on what happens in our lives. We are able to become a new creation because
the creative power comes from God.

In my sermon last Sunday, I mentioned Alcoholics Anonymous groups as a place where
people gain strength from other people who are likewise trying to resist temptation. But AA is
really well known for something else too. AA teaches that there is a higher power that is capable of
doing in us what we are powerless to do in ourselves. According to the Twelve Steps, that higher
power, or God, is able to restore us to sanity, remove defects of our character, and provide us with
the power to do God's will. AA teaches that a person has to want this deeply, commit to this daily,
and work through certain steps and exercises. But the power doesn't come from within ourselves.
The power that can make us into a new creation absolutely comes from God.
2. IN CHRIST

The second thing we notice about the new creation is that it comes to all those who are in Christ. In verse 17 Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation." In verse 19, Paul indicates "that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ." And in verse 21, Paul explains that God made Christ "to be sin for us, so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God." We are able to get a fresh and pure start because we are in Christ.

There are people who argue that we don't need Jesus Christ to find our salvation. There are those who believe that they can connect with God through other religious faiths and practices. And I won't argue that point. I believe God is resourceful enough to tap into people's hearts through a variety of methods. I believe that God cares enough for all the people of the world to use many different spiritual techniques and flavors to get people's attention and offer them salvation.

But for those of us who live in this country and culture, where Christianity is still the dominant religious perspective, I think it's safe to say that Jesus is a pretty sure bet. I don't hesitate a fraction of a second to tell you that I place my trust in Christ for my salvation--because I believe that, in Christ, we let go of our sins and guilt that drag us down and put us to death. In Christ, we are raised up to new life. Our sorrow is turned to joy; our transgressions are turned into acts of faith; and we are made into a new creation.

The transformation that comes to us in Christ is conveyed in these words by songwriter Bill Gaither:

Shackled by a heavy burden, 'neath a load of guilt and shame,
Then the hand of Jesus touched me, and now I am no longer the same.
He touched me, [Jesus] touched me, and O the joy that floods my soul!
Something happened, and now I know, he touched me and made me whole.

We are new creations because we place our trust in Christ.
3. **THROUGH US**

A new creation comes *from God* for those of us who put our trust *in Christ*. But a new creation also becomes available to others *through us*. In verse 20 Paul writes, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal *through us." In verse 19 Paul says that God "has committed to *us* the message of reconciliation."

Paul and his closest friends were missionaries and evangelists. They felt called by God to travel the Roman world and tell the good news about Jesus. But just because Paul was writing about himself and his traveling companions doesn't mean that we are left out. All of Jesus' disciples in every century have been given the great commission. We are all called by God to spread the good news. We are all charged with the responsibility of sharing the wonderful story of loving forgiveness and life transformation that comes to us from God in Jesus Christ.

How do we do that? We share our own personal stories, that's how. Every day we interact with someone, and every day we give them a little glimpse into our perspective on life. We tell them of our interests and occupations. We tell them of our fears and our sorrows, our hopes and our dreams. If we have received new life from God, then that's part of our story, and it will come through in what we say. If we live our new life by trusting in Christ, then that will come through, as well. You don't have to make "God" or "Jesus" every other word in every sentence. But you shouldn't hide God and Jesus from your conversations either.

We also share the possibility of a new creation by our actions. Whenever we engage in our communities and the world to make it a better place, we communicate our faith that God wants to bring about the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Whenever we work to decrease hunger, poverty, and violence, we are showing *through us*--through our actions--that we believe God has the power to bring about such a new creation. Whenever we stand strong for more resources for early
childhood education, more access to physical and mental health care, more opportunities for the disenfranchised, and more equality in the workplace, God's possibilities for transforming our society are seen through us. Whenever we step into the public arena with boldness that comes from God and in the name of Jesus Christ, the re-creation of the world happens through us.

CONCLUSION

That's why I want to invite you to participate with me in an action of Christian faith this coming week. This Thursday, March 14, at 12:00 noon, a group called Faith Leaders in Action will be gathering on the steps of the Pueblo County Courthouse. On that three-month anniversary of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, clergy and lay people of faith will stand together to read a statement that calls for civility in our discourse about laws related to guns. No, we don't all agree about how to solve the problem of gun violence. And, yes, we do allow freedom of speech in this country. But murderous threats, racial slurs, and intimidation tactics are not the ideal in communication. We Faith Leaders in Action are speaking up because we believe that God wants not only to give new birth to each one of us individually but also to our society as a whole. And we believe that this new creation from God and in Christ will only happen if we allow God to work through us. If you agree with me, I hope you will consider joining us at the courthouse on Thursday at noon.

Maybe gun violence prevention isn't your thing. I can respect that. But I do encourage you to get involved in something that improves you and the world. From God, in Christ, and through us--that's how we work together to bring about a new creation.