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*This sermon is third in a series of four delivered to complement St. Thomas's Vacation Bible School program, **Rivers of Life**.*

Better Isn't Really Better

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Beloved, I have to confess to you that I have a problem with the idea of better. Better is big business. Self-help books promising better fly off the shelf, and when hard news is slow, better is the next best thing: telling us all the ways we fail to measure up and "four simple steps" we can take to be better. Check-out aisle magazines will tell you how to get better *anything* - how to be a better spouse, just in time for Father's Day, how to have better kids, a better mortgage, better retirement accounts, how to pick out better paint colors for your kitchen, and better manage your time at work. All this striving to be better really just makes us worse. We see all the ways our neighbors aren't yet better. We see in ourselves mostly how we ourselves aren't better. Looking for better doesn't make us better. Thinking about being better doesn't make us better. It just fills our hearts and minds with all the ways nothing ever measures up. With all that inside us, how will we, really, ever be better? But, beloved, we're not called to be better. In our baptisms, we're made new.

Nearly all of St. Paul's letters are written in response to conflict within the congregations to which he was writing. The Galatians were sure he'd preached to them the wrong gospel. The Philippians thought he was probably a criminal, as he was in prison. In Corinth, they are upset because Paul wasn't what they think an apostle should be. He doesn't boast and brag and lay down his credentials as they'd expect a man of his supposed caliber to do. And, most importantly, he says he is coming to them and then, he doesn't. They accuse him of not being a man of his word. And he is supposed to be coming to them because they can't get along with each other either! If they are going to

trust his answers to their great many questions about what it means to be a Christian community, first, he's going to have to earn their trust.

I think most leaders get Paul's conundrum here. Everyone has an idea about what a CEO, a President, a Manager, a Head of Whatever, ought to look like. The best advice I every received was to have your own image of the kind of leader you are. Or you'll be swayed by everyone else's view of you. In a previous congregation, everything was in a binder when I was leading and I actually had an image of myself printed out. My image for myself is this: "Unlikely tour guide of the kin-dom of God." That's actually the heart of Paul's argument today. He tells the Corinthians that his goal as a leader and as a Christian is to be new creation. To be who he already is in Christ. And he starts by saying, I may not look like what you think a leader looks like. You're looking at me from a human point of view.

Think about how that worked when we looked at Christ that way. Sometimes, Jesus looks like a fool - he loves the outsider until the insiders are jealous. He treats the least with the dignity denied them until those who believe themselves to be great humiliate him. He preaches love until hate kills him. But, in the light of the resurrection, how we view Christ is completely new! And why can't that be true of each other? And why can't that be true of us? We are in Christ, and so we are new creation. And you see, Beloved, all of this newness comes from God, not from other people, not from magazine racks, not from society. It comes from God.

Now, you might be thinking, this is great, but sometimes I really am broken. I really am coming up short. I really am wrong. I'm burn out or washed up, and to often I take it out on those I love. And you know what? Me, too. But here's the difference between being better and being new creation. Being better comes from outside of us, but being new comes from within us. It comes from our baptisms, when God descended upon us, maybe like a dove, saying, "This is my child. This is my beloved." Everything we might yet be or become comes from that. What kind of person are you? You are beloved child of God. You are new creation!

And here's the difference. Being better is about conforming to someone else's definition of us. Being new - being more and more who we already are in Christ - is the heart of reconciliation. Being new brings us back to our neighbors, brings us back to our communities, back to our society, so they, too, can be made new. Being new means loving like Jesus, means asking questions of society like Jesus. Being new means living for you neighbor, like Jesus.

Will this improve your life? Yes! Richard Rohr often says, "We do not think ourselves into new ways of being; we live ourselves into new ways of thinking." Will this make you better? Well, yes, if better means new creation, if better means more like who you already are in Christ, if better means making the world more like the kin-dom of God. Will this make you better? Well, yes, if it is what you keep at your heart. If this is how you discern your next step. Yes, this will be a path to something like better, if you keep this truth at

your center: if anyone is in Christ, new creation! What would it mean for you in every piece of your life to live and be from this truth?

And so, beloved, here is our challenge. It is to give up on ideas of perfection that come from the newspaper, the magazine, the books, other people. You're not going to be able to be perfect by their standard - their job is always to find out where you are lacking. Your challenge, instead, is to look within, to see where you are already new, where you are already Christ-like. Any better you achieve from here will come from that point. Form your opinion of yourself and what you can do from there, not from what you have been told you ought to be, but from who God says you already are.

Amen.