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Sermon Title: Newness
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

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.

Happy New Year! That's the greeting of the past week. It doesn't seem possible that barely a week ago we were still all caught up in the special joys of Christmas! Almost 1,200 people packed our services on Christmas Eve – everyone from kids to grandparents, filled with excitement and expectation of Christmas morning. And then, like pulling some gigantic worldwide watch, we moved from “Merry Christmas” to “Happy New Year,” a perfect reminder of the New Year's motto: “Out with the old, in with the new!”

Our economy, our culture, even our religion, counts on it. “Out with the old, in with the new!” Old clothes, old fashions, old songs, old habits, old lifestyles, old mistakes – out with all of that! We all can't wait to see what's new: what's new in books? What's new on Broadway? What's new in the Congress? What's new in style and music? What are the new trends, new apps, new technology?

The Fairfield Citizen-News has started a new weekly column on religion, and they were frantically looking for writers this week, so I volunteered and began writing a column on "Newness," figuring I'd get a jump-start on my sermon. You could read it on Friday; I'd expand on it today. Instead, I got bumped to next week, so you get the longer version today and the mini-version in the paper.

But it was not column that got me thinking about "newness." Religion is filled with promises of newness. What our culture has done is just formalized it, ritualized it, secularized it, made popular the idea of a fresh start, a new beginning. But religions all along have always had a way to celebrate the renewal of life, faith, even the land itself.

When America finally got around to freeing the slaves, the slaves themselves saw it in terms of an old Biblical idea, "The Year of Jubilee." Jubilee was an ancient tradition in old-time Israel of everything from crop rotation to debt forgiveness to setting slaves free. The idea behind it was that everybody and everything needs a break. "Out with the old, in with the new." So even the farmland got a break, letting it lie fallow for a year, lie still, not dug up, not planted or fertilized, just resting, and then, a fresh start. Renewed, revived land, ready to produce.

Debt forgiveness and setting slaves free were other ways for the Bible to say we all get overextended, we all get behind, we all get trapped by our own behaviors, by circumstances beyond our control, by bad decisions, bad politics, bad wars, but everybody deserves a chance at "newness." And that's "Jubilee," that's the popularity of New Year's. It's universal, for everybody. We turn the calendar over. For one day we all start with a clean slate.

We hear that in sports all the time. It doesn't matter what your favorite sport is or your favorite team or what season they play in. For every sport there is an "Opening Day," and on Opening Day you'll often hear it said for that one day everybody is undefeated, everybody is in first place. It's a new season. A new ballgame. A new year.

Now, I suppose we could dismiss all this New Year's stuff as arbitrary or gimmicky. New Year's, after all, is just another day, no different, really, from switching the calendar from February 28th to March 1st. Still, gimmicks have their place.

Going back to my sports analogy, there is nothing wrong with that Opening-Day feeling, when all the mistakes of last year don't count anymore. All the

losses, all the errors, all the fumbles and misses and strikeouts – “the old has passed, the new has come.”

That, of course, is from our Scripture lesson. Newness is a regular concept in Christianity. Our part of the Bible is called the “New Testament.” The Holy Communion we just had is explained as the “New Covenant.” And St. Paul loved the whole idea of Christianity as one big, huge opportunity to start new. “Through Christ,” Paul says, “because of God's love for us as experienced in Jesus Christ, because of that we are a new creation, the old has passed the new has come.”

Then Paul likens Christianity to “putting on a new self,” just as you might put on a new set of clothes. You know that feeling you get when you're looking for a new suit, a new dress, a new look of some sort. It might be clothing or makeup or hair style, and sometimes it all turns out just right. It looks right, it feels right. You feel good.

Or, if Paul were writing today, he might liken Christianity to that “new-car smell.” You know what it's like. You've shopped and shopped and shopped. Your old car is not reliable. It's not working for you anymore. You finally find what you want, what you need, and it's yours. You get in it. It has that “new-car smell,” which declares loud and clear: no dents, no scratches, no spills, no breakdown, no rust, no wear and tear. No matter what you did to your old car, no matter what it looked like when you traded it in, no matter how you used it or abused it. That's over. It's done. “The old has passed. The new has come.”

Jesus also picks up the theme of “newness.” He spent his life inviting people to new life, to a fresh start. He knew everybody needed it. A lot of people hold onto old grudges, old destructive behaviors, old hang-ups. They never let them go. They may be mad at themselves or mad at somebody else, but they never let it go. Face it, we've all been wronged, we've all been done wrong. We disappoint, we get disappointed. We sin, we are sinned against. The problem is people hang on to it all – the hurt, the anger, the blame, the pain, the resentment, the fear. Folks who have been let down never want to trust again; folks who got hurt in some relationship never want to try again; folks who have failed never want to risk again. Whether we've been on the receiving end or the giving end (and most of us have been on both ends), we are gun shy.

I remember being in one wrestling match in high school. I got killed in the first period, killed in the second. Then the ref blew the whistle to start the third. And I'm thinking to myself, “Why do I need a third? Can't I just go home now?” One Major League baseball player actually did that. They say

Walter Johnson was the fastest pitcher in the history of baseball. They called him "Night Train" because nobody could see him. One batter got up. Strike one whizzed by. Strike two whizzed by, so he headed back to the bench. The umpire says, "What are you doin'?" The batter says. "I never saw the first two, why stay up for the third one?" Life is like that sometimes. Pummeled, intimidated, defeated – we are ready to pack it in.

Christianity says, "Forget it. Start over. Start ... new." And that's the key word: new. What Jesus said on this subject is "No one puts new wine into old wineskins. You put new wine into new wineskins." I don't know the science of it. It has something to do with fermentation. An old wineskin is rigid, susceptible to cracks. You pour new wine into it, it expands. The old wineskin can't handle it. It splits open, wine is lost. So you put new wine into a new wineskin.

Same with life. The old has passed. Then, the new has come. But first, the old has to pass. Old mistakes, old methods, old behaviors, old ideas, old habits. If they weren't working before, don't repeat them. Let the old pass so the new can at least have a chance.

When I was coaching baseball up in Massachusetts, our league had a top-of-the-line pitching machine, and every team had the use of it a couple of hours each week. One afternoon no other adults were around, so I turned the machine up to 100 miles per hour. *One hundred miles per hour*. To a bunch of 13- and 14-year-olds. They all wanted to try it, but they all thought they couldn't hit it, and they were right. Not the old way. Every player had his own way of standing at the plate and swinging. And that way, that old way, they couldn't hit a 100-mile-an-hour baseball. But I showed them ... if you move your hands way up on the bat, "choke up," we called it, and you shorten your swing – short, quick swings using just half the bat – they could do it. And they did. And with renewed confidence they won the championship.

Out with the old. In with the new. A new approach. A new way of thinking. A new paradigm. That's the promise of the new year. Whatever you've been doing that hasn't been working, don't do it that way anymore. Let the old pass away. Let the new begin.

That's the promise of Christ.