

## Genesis 12:1-6

<sup>1</sup>Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

<sup>4</sup> **So Abram went, as the Lord had told him;** and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. <sup>5</sup>Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, <sup>6</sup>Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

## Galatians 6:14-16

<sup>14</sup>May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. <sup>15</sup>For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! <sup>16</sup>As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

## Mark 2:21-22

<sup>21</sup> 'No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. <sup>22</sup>And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; **but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.**'

## Ride Those Gnarly Waves

One of the joys of fatherhood, or one of its curses depending on how you look at it, is that as you raise your child you can reflect back upon your own childhood and see how you have and haven't changed. I got to spend a lot of time with James over the last week, down time in the hospital while tests were being done, and I could see in him that he has really grown up. But I was reminded how conscious he was, and how conscious I was, about how I dressed, how I looked, all those things we do to fit in while we try to convince ourselves that we are unique. Do you remember? As a teenager my jeans had to be the right brand and the right degree of fading, my shirts had to be the right color, I had to hang out with the right crowd, listen to the right music, all this in order **appear normal** to the people I wanted to like me.

Our need to "fit in" does not go away with age, and that is perfectly normal. We all have a need for friends and relationships, and we make a conscious effort to look and speak and act in ways that do not repel the people we care about. If we're invited to a party, we think about what we should wear, what topics to talk about, what to avoid, what to bring, what time to leave. It's part of what makes us human; our ability to get along with each other in close proximity; we can sit next to a stranger on a plane for four hours and not get into a fight – try that with any other animal and see what happens.

And I dare say that we who go to church also do a good job of fitting in to our church culture. But today I want to challenge you not to simply fit in, not to do things and act in ways that don't raise waves with the people sitting around you; The only person that I care that you get along with is Jesus. The only *NORM* that you need to keep is the norm of a Spirit-filled life, which very often is a lot different from the *norms* that you might see around you. It's normal to gossip and to put others down and build walls around yourself and your possessions to protect them, but that is not the norm for those who dwell in Christ. And though the Christian religion has been around for almost two thousand years, those of you who dwell in Christ should recognize that not all Christians have Christ dwelling in him. Those who have are what Paul refers to as NEW CREATIONS. We're different from what we were before, and different from so many people around us, even different from many Christians. That may sound a little odd; *different from Christians?* Well, today I assert that we are different from Christians based on how Christians so often define themselves. To many, being a Christian is about fitting in to the expectations of the Church – having the right theology and backing the right candidates and having the right stand on social issues, and of course being charitable to a degree. But are they new creations? Do they have the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them, guiding them, prompting them, shaking them up from time to time, or are they just going through the motions and meeting the minimum requirements of church attendance and offerings? If that's all that their religion means to them, then I dare say they have more in common with a non-Christian than they do with a disciple of Jesus Christ; I'll go one step further and say that many people who come from many other faith traditions – Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Humanists – have a great deal more in common with a disciple of Jesus Christ than many so-called Christians do.

That's what Paul means in our Epistle lesson when he's talking about circumcision and uncircumcision. Paul is infuriated because he has started this wonderful church in Galatia where people are truly following the risen Lord Jesus. These people are, to use the modern expression, *born again*. But in Paul's absence a bunch of "Christians" have come to that church and are selling people on the notion that what they really need is not Jesus but *religion!* They don't tell the people not to love Jesus, but they tell them to love Jesus *and* get circumcised; then they will be *real* Christians. You're doing great following Jesus, but there are a few other requirements in order for us to process your membership application. Paul has some rather choice words for these religious folks who are trying to get the men to agree to circumcision; he suggests that they apply the knife liberally to their own bodies and, and he hopes that they slip.

5. Paul wasn't fooling around, and we shouldn't either. Are you religious or are you faithful? You may have a clear understanding of what is expected of you as a member of the church, and you have a clear understanding of church theology, but that does not make you a new creation in Christ. That's right. Coming to church means nothing in and of itself. Being baptized means nothing in and of itself. Taking Holy Communion means nothing in and of itself. Even evangelizing means nothing in and of itself. Because if you consider any of these rituals or behaviors as something required by God, you've missed the whole point of Jesus Christ. The good news has gone in one ear and out the other. You've traded Jesus for a bunch of doctrine and practice that we declare to be essential for salvation. Then we try to convince others of just how important our religion is and get them to agree with us and show us by joining our church. We get carried away with things that don't really matter in the scheme of things. We have made our religion too important and living in Jesus not important enough.

I like what Barry Goldwater once said:

Being in politics is like being a football coach. You have to be smart enough to understand the game and dumb enough to think it's important.

A very insightful comment from a man who spent his life in politics. Well let me tell you that the same thing applies to the church. We can know how the church works, we can know the intricacies of church administration and church law, we can know the Book of Discipline inside and out, we can know our Methodist theology and the greatest quotes of John Wesley, and all of that is good and well, but don't make the mistake of thinking any of that is really important. The beauty of being a New Creation in Jesus Christ is that you understand just how unimportant Christianity the religion really is.

As my favorite theologian put it:

"It is the greatness of Christianity that it can see how small it is. The importance of being a Christian is that we can stand the insight that it is of no importance. It is the spiritual power of religion that he who is religious can fearlessly look at the vanity of religion. It is the maturest fruit of Christian understanding to understand that Christianity, as such, is of no avail. This is boasting, not personal boasting, but boasting about Christianity. As boasting it is foolishness. But as boasting about the fact that there is nothing to boast about, it is wisdom and maturity." (Paul Tillich in *The New Being*)

The failure of many Christians is in presenting Christianity as a religion, to be compared with other religions and to try to convince others that our religion is better than theirs. There is nothing about the religion of Christianity to boast about.

And we were not created to sell a religion to anyone. BUT WE WERE CREATED DECLARE GOOD NEWS. WE WERE CREATED TO BE RECONCILED TO GOD AND TO TELL OTHERS THAT THEY TOO ARE RECONCILED TO GOD, and notice that sentence is in the passive tense. We didn't do anything; God did it all. We didn't reconcile ourselves to God, and therefore we can't boast about it. All we can do is to abide in Jesus, the one who reconciles us to God. Don't abide in a theology that states how Jesus reconciles us to God; abide in Jesus himself.

This is the new reality the disciple of Jesus lives into. Jesus says you can't put new wine in old wineskins; we're no longer adhering to religious practices that supposedly reconcile us to God – we're living the reconciled life now, thanks to Jesus, and that's why we abide in him. Abraham understood this over sixteen hundred years before Jesus walked the earth. There was a perfectly good religion available to him and his family, but Abraham was more interested in following God than in following religion. After he left his hometown there was probably a lot of gossip going around his church; "Where's Abraham? Why isn't he coming to church anymore? I heard he resigned his seat on the board of trustees. God's not going to be pleased with him." Abraham had bigger fish to fry; he was not a man bound to ritual but bound to obey the word of the living God, to go into strange lands with nothing but the assurance that the voice he was hearing was indeed the voice of the one true God.

There was no need for Abraham to follow rituals designed to reconcile him to God, because the mere fact that he was hearing the voice of God indicated that God had already reconciled himself to Abraham. And so Abraham abided in the word of God, and obeyed the voice that led him.

This, my friends, is the assurance of salvation – knowing that God has indeed reconciled himself to us apart from any rituals or good works we could perform. This is what sets us apart from others and allows us to see this world through new eyes.

And as people who dwell in Christ, as new creations in Christ, we play by a different set of rules than the rest of the world, even different from many self-identified Christians. We are not rocked or shaken by the uncertainties of this world because our foundation is unshakeable and eternal. I give thanks to God and to all of you for praying for James and us last week, and I would have certainly been sad and distraught had the outcome not been so good, but deep at the center of my being I had a calm, knowing that God is not only loving but eternal, and that he has reconciled all of us including my son to him. This is the faith that sustains all of us and brings us through every storm in life. We have, as Paul calls it, *a peace that transcends understanding* because it's a peace that is not contingent upon how well the world seems to be meeting our demands but rather depends upon a God who is completely faithful and dependable. So when the norms of this world are no longer norms, those who dwell in Christ, those of us who are new creations in Christ, weather the changes however extreme they might be.

I like to think of us as surfers. The waves represent the powerful forces that work around us – not just the forces of nature, but the forces of politics and economics and commerce, things that we have very little control over. They are like huge waves, capable of crushing buildings, capable of drowning us if we're not careful. I think most people look for ways to avoid those waves – their lives are guarded, and they try to build structures that will be safe from those waves. But we're surfers. We ride the waves. All those changes and those unpredictable events don't frighten us. We ride them out, perhaps even seeing them as opportunities to improve our surfing abilities. Do you see a big wave coming? Kowabunga, DUDE! Let's catch that gnarly wave!

Many of you have lived through not only great recessions but great depressions as well, wars and terrorist attacks, health issues, losses of loved ones, things that make James' cavernous angioma seem like a bump in the road. Have you found your peace in Christ? Do you abide in him and trust him to guide you through any circumstance? Do you see that you are no longer what you used to be but a new creation in Christ? Let the joy of that reality sink in and permeate your entire being. Christ has freed us for joyful obedience, not reluctant or coerced obedience – we obey Christ because he dwells in us and we are happy about it. And we are not bound by the norms of this world. We are new wine in new wineskins.