

“Hello! I’m Your Really New Minister!”

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Text: II Corinthians 5:16-19

Community Christian Church

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8:30 a.m., 9:20 a.m., 10:45 a.m.

Well, Hello! I’m your really new minister!

It feels great to say that this morning. And it is so wonderful to be here, to be anywhere, really, to be alive, after a heart attack, but especially good to be here in this most beloved of people and places.

To say Hello is to engage in an extravagance of welcoming grace with others. So I say “Hello” to you, as you have said it to me. And when we say “Hello” to one another, we are making ourselves ready to say hello to the wider community, those who are yet without a church home, and those outside these walls where we meet them. When we say “Hello” in that spirit, we’re showing the world that there are persons that care. The world is desperately waiting for someone to say, as John Prine puts it so beautifully in a song “Hello In There.” So “Hello!”

And not only that but also “I’m your *really* new minister!” It’s good to say that, as well. After a three-month sabbatical which found me traipsing across 7800 miles of interstate highways and intra-state roadways, across 13 states (mostly in the humid southern tier of the U.S.), and with only 1 pulpit to preach in, and after imagining a transformatively new manner of preparing sermons, I’m your new minister. After the August 14 existential speed-bump (otherwise known as an Acute Myocardial Infarction), I’m now your *really* new minister.

“*Really New*” is preferable to “new.” When we say the word “new” we sometimes mean “novel,” “unique,” and sometimes “fresh gimmick.” I don’t mean that at all.

Sometimes when we say “new” we mean “never owned.” As a used car is termed “pre-owned,” so now “brand new” means “never owned.” But I don’t mean that.

Neither do I mean to convey the newness of a newly minted coin, a fresh, bright penny, eager to go into circulation where it has never gone before. Not that kind of “new” either.

When I say "I'm your really new minister," I mean to emphasize what Paul emphasized in his correspondence with the cantankerous Corinthians. In the middle of his churchly advice as a chief ministerial counselor to a group of Christians seeking how best to be church, he assures them of his concern for them. Then he blesses them with affection. Then he offers one of his greatest theological statements. We might call it Paul's "Declaration of Reconciliation" - *"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!"*

In some portions of Holy Scripture punctuation isn't important. Here it is. When you place a colon in the middle of a sentence, and an exclamation point at the end of it, everything in between is supremely important. It means "Pay attention! ... This it!" Paul declares, above and beyond anything else he has said, *"Everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!"*

This is a good word for all of us to hear. For it means that not only am I your new minister, but that we *all* are new creations. When we dig down deep into the gist of what Jesus was doing with his life and ministry, we see that it was all about inviting, encouraging, inspiring everyone to become brand new. Giving anyone who would accept it a second chance. Moving beyond failure and success in the past into new adventures. Changing and shedding old ways so that stunning new paths could be explored. Refusing to abide by old conventions and instead embracing fresh opportunities for new creativity.

Think of his relationships - with Zaccheus, with the Samaritan woman at the well, with Nicodemus, with the woman caught in adultery, and with his disciples, *especially* his disciples. Always Jesus was luring them, entreating them, coaxing them to take on the new creations they were meant to be.

We forget this in our journey of faith, don't we? We are sometimes victims of self-imposed amnesia and consider all of life, including our faith, as being merely, as they used to say in Korea, "same old, same old."

This summer, on the long journey of the sabbatical, I was reminded several times just how new and alive and jolting the gospel can be. And I found myself musing with gladness on what that might mean for us.

On the Natchez Trace on the way to Johnny and Debbie Wray's farm in West Point, Mississippi, I beheld the beauty of pine and elder and oak and juniper and sky-blue and deep vistas and treasured paths and nonurban-country-fresh air. And then I sat atop Butter Bean, one of their horses and rode the length and width of their land. And then I perched myself (with great innocence and naiveté) on a 67 year-old John Deere tractor and bush-hogged their "back 20."

In the middle of that swelteringly hot day I was made new, shedding (by sweating) at least 5 pounds and knowing *that such labor can be cleansing, healing, and, while always challenging (especially for a city slicker like me), renewing.*

It happened again in the span of 4 days when I talked with Fred Craddock in Cherry Log, Georgia, and with Gardner C. Taylor in Raleigh, North Carolina. These two princes of the pulpit have inspired me beyond measure, just as they have inspired countless congregations throughout their collective 106 years of preaching excellence.

As I sat with each of them, they provided a model for what enlivened and enriched ministry can be. Fred is 82 and Dr. Taylor is 92, and they are still discovering more new things about the gospel and God and grace than a minister one-third their age – no matter how smart he or she is – could even begin to fathom or imagine. How do they do that? How do they provide such an example? Because they know what Paul knew about the truth which Jesus proclaimed and made possible to anyone who would follow after him: *“everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!”*

During the Agape Feast this past Wednesday, Matt Harris-Gloyer asked the last question of the Q&A session. “What are you looking forward to most now that you’re back from the sabbatical?” he asked. He could have added, “And what are you looking forward to most now that you’re back from the brink of the heart attack?” I fumbled with a few “for instances” and other possibilities. The I gave my final answer: “Each new day. That’s what I’m most looking forward to. Yes. Each ... new ... day.”

Such an answer came, to be sure, out of my experience of a medical crisis. But the awesome examples of Dr. Craddock and Dr. Taylor would have been sufficient sources of inspiration to seize the wonders of each new day. They, like Paul, would have us know that every day of our lives and each new day in our walk of faith, we have the opportunity to experience new splendors and wonders: *“everything old has passed away; see everything has become new.”*

One of the tremendous graces of the sabbatical were several opportunities for the blessing of origins. It first occurred in the plunge into past pulpit masters – reveling in the manuscripts and first works of Howard Thurman, Gardner C. Taylor, and Carlyle Marney. I wandered through those manuscripts *with deep gratitude for how they had spurred on my own meager efforts when I began to preach.*

It occurred again during a sojourn to Texas. In Pasadena, Texas, at a multi-year choir reunion of Sam Rayburn High School Alums, it was stirring to regroup with old friends and be energized by our old choir director, Ray Witt, as he led us in a rousing (and seasoned) version of the “Battle Hymn of The Republic.” It was also in Pasadena that I responded to an invitation to preach at First Christian Church, the congregation of my high school years. Former youth sponsors, previous Sunday School teachers, team mates on our old church league basketball team. And the gift of a Bible which the First Christian Church NEW JESUS SINGERS Youth Choir dedicated to the life and memory of my mother, Bennie Lee Hill, shortly after she died one month after I graduated from high school. All of it was a blessing in this way: *a return to the places and people of old afforded me a chance to forgive and be forgiven ancient trespasses.*

Paul knew the crucial *importance* of this dynamic and hinged the “new creation” to it: “... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, *no longer counting their trespasses against them...*”

Do you know this truth? Have any of us yet sufficiently grasped the revolutionary power of this truth? Can we dare even today to live by such a bubble-bursting, presumption-popping, fakery-foiling, delusion-destroying dynamic? What would it mean for us to forgive old trespasses in the manner that God has already forgiven us? God has set the pattern, God has completed the reconciliation, God has fulfilled our destiny. All we’re called to do is live into it! Do we dare? Do we dare to bless our origins by “no longer counting their trespasses against them” just as God no longer counts our trespasses against us? Shall we dare to really, really, really be new creations by accepting God’s reconciliation and living the forgiving, reconciling life?

So being renewed and blessing origins, taking/blessing each new day and blessing/moving beyond our origins– these are gifts for us to seize.

One other task remains. The apostle Paul says that God has “[entrusted] the message of reconciliation to us.” God has given each and every one of us diplomatic status. We are all “ambassadors for Christ.” God has appointed us as emissaries of His mercy, representatives of His righteousness, legates of His love, ambassadors of reconciliation.

The occasions to fulfill our roles as members in God’s diplomatic corps are truly un-ending, you know. Take Mr. Terry Jones for instance.

In response to a question posed by a Community member about the furor being fomented by Terry Jones down in Gainesville, Florida, as Mr. Jones had planned to burn copies of the Quran on Saturday, I said that today, my first Sunday back in this pulpit, I’d offer a brief commentary about Mr. Jones and his yearning to burn copies of the Quran. Some of you may have seen a short snippet of a television interview I did with Jake Peterson, a reporter from KSHB (Channel 41), about an hour before the Agape Feast Wednesday evening.

I had heard (back in July or August) about Mr. Jones' Quran burning plan, but I didn’t know much about him or his church. What I’ve since discerned from the public comments he has made and from his website is that he espouses a kind of reactionary fundamentalism that condemns folks who don't think and believe as he does. What he is promoting and doing to register his protest against people he thinks are his enemies is mostly bigotry and purely founded on hatred.

Such bigotry is borne out of a *willful ignorance* which thoughtful people everywhere, and especially Christians in the U.S., need to resist. Because of the freedom of religion we enjoy in this country, Mr. Jones has every right to be as willfully ignorant and bigoted and full of hatred as he chooses. But it behooves thoughtful people – and here I like to think of Community as a gathering of such thoughtful people – to say

privately among our friends and to declare as publicly as we can that his choices, and the choices of those who follow him, are sad, regrettable, and, indeed, repugnant.

While Mr. Jones actions have incited a media blitz in this country, they have also further inflamed the small-focused passions of a small band of equally bigoted, hate-filled fundamentalistic Muslims. And none of that is any good for the world. As I said in a portion of the television interview, Mr. Jones represents to the world the worst possible face of the Christian faith and the worst possible example of a U.S. citizen. From all we know about the person, witness, and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, Mr. Jones stands totally outside of what is acceptably Christian. And from what we continue to learn from Christ's on-going presence and God's persistent love of the human family, Mr. Jones' fomenting has done nothing to honor the tragic victims connected to the infamous day of 9/11 and has very likely put yet more people, particularly American soldiers, in harm's way.

Our best expressions of the faith we hold dear and true happen when we live out the highest principles of our faith, not by committing violent actions against the objects/symbols of another faith. And besides, holiness is never contained solely in a book. Holiness is ultimately a never-ending project for the living of our days. We become "right" and we are right *as* we do all that we can to embody love in the world.

Perhaps the best way for us to embody the love called for by our faith is to pray for Mr. Jones, and those who follow his belligerently hate-filled counsel. And then after praying, try to imagine how he might be transformed out of his hatred and away from his fearful posture toward others who are different. How we might participate in that transformation – and our own – toward a more respectful and civil engagement with the important issues of the day must also be part of our prayers as well.

To stand up and speak out about our faith, to pray for Mr. Jones, to imagine how he and we might be transformed by God's powerful love – this is what it means to be ambassadors for Christ and to share the message of reconciliation.

So, once again, "Hello! I'm your Really New Minister!" I'm so glad to be here! As you might suspect, in the wake of the heart attack crisis, I'm glad to be anywhere. But, I must repeat, I'm *really* glad to be here, with you, on this parcel of God's ever-awesome, soul-inspiring Holy Grand.

Two quotes to close. One comes from Matt Walsh, a Community member with whom I met the day before the sabbatical journey began. In a way-too-brief conversation in the church library, Matt offered a succinct summarizing compliment of my preaching. He told me he appreciated the overarching essence of my Sunday and Wednesday messages, which, he said, could he put this way: "Don't be an idiot!" Now I had thought I had been about the business of poetic reverie and profound theological insights. But no, Matt said that "Don't be an idiot!" has been my theme. I've come to think Matt is right. For "idiot means to abide "only or solely of one's own." Indeed, let's not be idiots. Let's not be kept down by any *idiom* that isn't the fullest expression of the

best within us and the best that is within humanity. Let's not be restricted by the *idiosyncrasies* of our past limitations but be freed, liberated, set loose into God's wonderful future for us and for the world.

The other quote is the last one of the "90 Quotes Along the Sabbatical Journey" that I compiled over the course of the 90 days away from Community. It is from Louis L'Amour and goes like this: "*There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. That will be the beginning.*" Beginning on August 14 and every day since the people of St. Luke's Hospital saved my life and our blessed family of faith here at Community cradled me in prayer and served as saving salve in the healing process, I know the deep truth of Louis L'Amour's wisdom. This is now the beginning!

I'm your really new minister. We are really new creations. We have been called to a brand new ministry of reconciliation. Come on ambassadors, let's go!! Amen.