

Some time during the first grade, I complained to my parents
That I couldn't see the chalk board in class—everything was fuzzy
I had to squint and really concentrate to see much of anything
The doctor told me on their own my eyes didn't work quite right
And I needed to get glasses to address the issue

Even now, without some kind of corrective lens—glasses or contacts
My vision is blurry—I might see some blobs of color, light & dark
But nothing particularly distinct
If I were to drive w/o my lenses, I would be a real danger to myself/others
So everyday, I put on contacts so I can see the world in right perspective

This AM, I'd say that regardless of whether you wear glasses/contacts
Every one of us has a unique set of lenses through which we see the world
Lenses that have been assembled over the course of our lifetime
Our lens is a set of assumptions, values, instincts, metrics
Installed in our mind's eye through our family of origin, our experiences
Our education, our faith, our friendships, our cultural identity

And as we wrap up this sermon series A Compelling Life
I want to argue that how we determine what makes a life
good/valuable/compelling/meaningful
Has *everything* to do with the lens through which we view
Ourselves, our community, our world and our calling

The lens through which we view ourselves/community/world/calling
Guides the way we think & feel & ultimately behave in any # of situations
Over the course of our lifetime

For example, if the lens through which you view the world informs you
That the St Louis Cardinals are the greatest franchise in baseball history
You'll be inclined to adjust your behavior to conform to that vision of reality
You'll watch games on TV, buy Cardinals apparel
You'll learn player names, study the history of the team
Celebrate when the team wins and mope when they lose
And you'll develop a sense of camaraderie w/others who love the Cardinals

If the lens through which you view the world informs you

That success in life *primarily* means getting rich & *looking* successful

Then you may push yourself to achieve that goal

Regardless of the cost to your health, your relationships, your walk with God

You may pressure yourself & your family to project an image of perfection

And shame yourself or your family when that image isn't kept up

B/C the lens through which you view the world says that anything less

Is simply unacceptable

If the lens through which you view the world informs you

That some people in life are inherently more valuable than others

That people of one skin tone are by their very nature inferior

Then you may think it's only logical when those people are systematically excluded, oppressed or forced to the margins of society

You'll see no issue when the justice system is stacked against those persons

& If push came to shove, you might fight to keep those people in their place

We all have a lens through which we view the world

That informs the way we think, feel and behave

The Q is: What's yours? What are those factors that are influencing yours?

It's a fascinating thing to stop and reflect on this question

Because all of us take for granted the fact that we do have a set of lenses

And we often assume that the way that we see the world is in fact, correct

Until something happens to change the way that we see the world

For the longest time, people were convinced that the world was flat

And if you sailed far enough toward the horizon

You would ultimately fall off the edge of the world

This was thought true until Mr. Columbus kept sailing and found

That the world was not flat, but was in fact, round

And our understanding of the world has never been the same

For the longest time, people were convinced that the earth

Was sitting stationary at the center of the universe

And that the moon and sun and stars revolved around it

This was accepted as gospel truth until Mr. Copernicus
Proposed an alternate model of the cosmos that put the Sun at the center
With the earth revolving around it
And our understanding of the galaxy was never the same

For the longest time, a man in the first century named Saul
Was convinced that the sect within Judaism known as The Way
Represented absolute betrayal to the nation and religion of Israel
And with all the zeal in his heart, he pledged to eradicate
The sect that pledged loyalty to—and even worshipped—Jesus of Nazareth
Who they claimed was the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel
The Son of God, who was raised from the dead
This Saul did all he could to silence, arrest and even kill followers of Jesus
What do we call people who target & kill religious minorities? TERRORISTS
I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that this is who Saul was.
Until one day, on the road to Damascus something happened
That forever changed the lens through which he viewed
Himself, his community, his world and his calling

Many years later, this Saul, now known as Paul
Was helping to spread—not silence—the message about Jesus
And he wrote to a community of believers in the city of Corinth
Explaining to them why he was willing to face
Trouble and persecution and poverty
Why he was willing to endure loneliness and rejection
Why he was now traveling to the ends of the earth to plant
And cultivate communities of people who follow Jesus
Paul wrote to give the church at Corinth
A glimpse at the lens through which he had come to see the world

2 Corinthians 5—beginning at v. 14

I invite you to keep your Bibles open this morning
We are going to read a few verses at a time, pause/reflect/keep going
The Apostle Paul has just said he’s explaining his worldview, not to brag
But so that the Corinthians might understand where he’s coming from

2 Corinthians 5:14-16

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.

Paul says:

What now informs the lens through which I see the world
Is the sacrificial love of Christ—the one who willingly died for all
Having now experienced that love & coming to believe in the one who loves
I am now compelled by that love to think and feel and behave
In ways that are exactly opposite of how I once did.

Not only was it the love of God *for Paul* that changed *his* worldview
It was the love of God *for everyone else* that really got his attention
He died for ALL—not just for the select few
Not just for the members of one ethnic group or club or tribe or nation
Not just those who were most popular or who hadn't done anything wrong

And God invites 'ALL' to discover a new reason to live
To live, not for ourselves, but for the one who died and was raised again
That we in turn might experience true life

And it's the inclusive nature of Christ's death for 'ALL' that transforms the lens
Through which Paul views himself, his community, his world, his calling

He said: 'So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view'
Have you ever had a friend, someone you really liked and were close to
And your friend had another friend that you really didn't like?
Or perhaps your son/daughter has a friend that just drives you up the wall
Apart from your love of your friend or your son and daughter
Your relationship with their friend wouldn't stand a chance
But because of *their love* for this person, you are willing to give them a shot
Your view of them is altered b/c of the value placed on them by one you love
Consequently, your love for your friend/family member
Becomes the lens through which you now see this other person

Paul says that this principle proves true with Christ and all of sinful humanity
Christ loved and died for ALL
So we can't look at that ALL in the same way
Our friends, our enemies, our family, complete strangers
We can't look at these the way that we might on our own b/c *one died for all*

This revelation ought to stop us in our tracks
Because as generous & kind & loving as we'd like to think ourselves to be
If we really paid attention to our behavior and our attitudes
We'd discover that there are, from time to time, people we just don't like
There are, for some of us, people we actually hate
Perhaps someone who wronged you, or wronged someone you love
Someone w/whom you have real grievances
Who are those people, that when they pop up in your mind
Cause your blood pressure to rise, you can feel the anger beginning to boil?
Those people, that person, is one for whom Christ died

A couple of weeks after the death of Osama bin Laden
An artist that I follow named Jim LePage
Was reflecting on his struggle to know just how he SHOULD be feeling
As a Xian with the news of bin Laden's death
Most of the country was celebrating, but as a Xian
Who must "regard no one from a worldly point of view"
Jim LePage felt torn, so he created a piece
That demonstrated the stark contrast
Between the love of God seen in Christ and his own feelings and inclinations
[Fire Osama bin Laden image—keep up until end of page]

Jim said: "When you look at this design, it may not feel true. Honestly, it doesn't feel true to me either. But guess what? I don't get to decide whether it's true or not."

The revelation that "one died for all" is beautiful and moving and sentimental
Until we realize its scandal; until we realize that one REALLY died for all
And it's not until we feel that revolt within ourselves, "You mean 4 him too?"
That we can truly appreciate the devastating & incomprehensible mercy of God
Revealed in Jesus Christ

Paul, who had more in common w/bin Laden than we may be comfortable admitting

Experienced that devastating mercy on the day Jesus confronted him
When he was riding to Damascus to hunt down & terrorize Christians
His sin was in the spotlight; he was face to face with the truth
And he had to die; the sinful nature in him was put to death
And by the mercy of God he was given a new life
A new set of eyes and a new calling
Christ died for all—even Paul, even me, even you.

Having given the Corinthians a peek at the world through his eyes
Paul explains how the truth of Christ who died for all
Changes how he sees himself, his community, his world and his calling

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

How does Paul now see himself?

Despite the fact that he persecuted the Church (imagine the shame he felt)
Paul says now that he is "in Christ," he is "a new creation."
He doesn't say, "Hopefully someday God can forgive me..."
He's not operating from a posture of insecurity
Hoping he can do enough righteous deeds to make up for his sin
No, if anyone is in Christ "they ARE a new creation"
It's already a blank slate; there is a present-tense reality of newness

How does all this change the way Paul sees his community?

His brothers and sisters who are in Christ
THEY are a new creation
In spite of their sin, their imperfection, their quarrels, their chaos
THEY are a new creation—and Paul challenges them to live like it!

Emily and I have been reading Paul's letters over the last few months
And I am struck with how frequently this theme of new creation pops up
Paul assumes that in a very real way
Those who are in Christ, those who have been baptized into God's family
Are now empowered to count themselves "dead to sin and alive to God"

Paul says, "Listen, Corinthians!

You are new creations in Christ. Embrace it. Live into it.
Put to death your sin and rivalry and in-fighting
And embrace the newness of life Christ made possible
Through his death and resurrection!"

Look around this room. Our brothers and sisters in Christ around this room
Are new creations in Christ; we may not always act like it
Some days we may look like the spitting image of the old creation
But if we are IN CHRIST, we are NEW.
Let's tell each other the truth; let's call each other to live into that newness
And put to death the old sinful nature within us

It's only natural to grow cynical regarding our own efforts to change/improve
And in some senses, to be a cynic of self is merely living in reality
But while we're cynics of self, we should be optimists of grace
Confident in what God is doing and can do within us
We ARE a new creation and we are becoming a new creation
That's true for you—and it's true for your brothers/sisters in X; embrace it!

How does all this change the way Paul sees the world?

That the world—w/all its idolatry and brokenness and violence and disorder
Is the intended object of the reconciling love of God
That the world and the worst that it can muster
Is the prize for which Christ died and for which Christ will one day return
Since God so loved the world
It must be true that "Paul so loved the world..." & I so loved // YOU so...

And all this changes how Paul sees his life's calling
Since he has been reconciled, forgiven and restored to God
The task of Paul's life is now to announce to the world
That freedom and grace and forgiveness and restoration
Are made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus
Paul is now called to be an ambassador of Christ
Compelling, persuading and inviting people to place their faith in him

This whole transformation that Paul has undergone
In the way he sees himself, his community and his world, his calling
Is what the Christian life is all about
This is discipleship, this is sanctification
This is "counting yourself dead to sin and alive to Christ"
This is what life as a NEW CREATION looks like
Exchanging one set of lenses for a whole new one
Unlearning and relearning what it means to be human
To be recreated in Christ; to live like him and for him
In the world he loves, the world he died to save and lives to redeem

For the Apostle Paul, everything changed when he came to believe
Truly believe—that one died for all
So he could no longer see himself, his community, his world or his calling
In quite the same way
In essence, he repented. He turned from one way of living/seeing the world
To another altogether

This week, Christians all around the world will observe Ash Wednesday
Together we begin a season of reflection called Lent
Where we are invited to "repent and believe the Gospel"
Lent leads us to Holy Week (Palm Sunday, Maundy Thurs, Good Fri, Holy Sat)
And ultimately to the celebration of the resurrection of X on Easter

What a perfect opportunity for all of us as the people called Asbury
To enter into a time of reflection and renewal
Examining the lens through which we see the world
And inviting God's Spirit to search/correct us/conform us to the image of X

We'll start a new sermon series next week called *Following Jesus*

Where we focus on some of the foundational practices of discipleship

Let's commit together to leaning into this season as a time of renewal

The kind of transformation we need is not something we can do on our own

As we said, we are cynics of self, but optimists of grace. Confident in God.

As we come to the Table, we come confessing our sin & need of grace

But we also come celebrating our forgiveness/acceptance/empowerment

As we take into our very bodies the nourishing life & presence of Jesus

With the bread and wine

Whatever you need from God today, bring that need to the table

Come with open hands, expectant and ready to receive

Ready to be changed, ready to encounter the risen Christ

Let's pray.