

A New Creation

Fourth Sunday in Lent
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, March 14, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Joshua 5:9-12; II Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's been nearly a year since Susan Boyle became a household name. I'm sure most of you know her story. A dowdy, middle-aged Scotswoman made it to the stage in the television show "Britain's Got Talent." (The United Kingdom's version of "American Idol" with Simon Cowell to boot!) Susan's salt-and-pepper hair, matronly dress, and sensible shoes all conspired to lead the audience and judges to assume the worst: A voice that might screech. A voice that might barely cling to the right pitch, just off enough to make you wince. As Susan was introduced, and as she spoke to Simon from the stage, the catcalls and titters and smirks began in the auditorium. *We're in for a treat, their faces seemed to say—a regular "Gong Show" episode! Where's Chuck Barris when you need him?*

You probably know the rest of the story. When Susan began to sing "I Dreamed a Dream" from *Les Miserables*, the catcalls and titters were replaced with gasps of delight and awe, and then cheers and applause throughout her singing. Her voice was exquisite. It was as if Susan Boyle was transfigured in her singing. She was seen in a whole new light. She was seen as beautiful. Will we ever know how many hits on YouTube that moment on stage produced? (Actually, when I checked on Wednesday, one version of that moment had received 88, 805,000 views.) 88,805,000 views from other human beings—usually after someone said to them, "You gotta see this! You need to listen to her sing! You'll never believe it!"

Susan Boyle walked on that stage, and as we so often do, we regarded her from a human point of view. You know how we do that—we pass judgment and use labels to place people into particular categories that determine what we think about them, how we speak about them, how we treat them. And so often our first impression is the one we insist is accurate. So often that first impression sticks—unless something momentous occurs that makes a second impression triumph over the first. Susan's voice did just that. We didn't see her as this awkward, dowdy matron. We regarded her as a beautiful someone with a beautiful gift to share.

Did you hear what Paul writes in his second letter to the church at Corinth? *From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

Paul says that this new way of regarding other people resulted from a momentous event in his own life—his coming to know Jesus Christ as his Lord. Paul says he once regarded Jesus from a human point of view. In Paul's mind, Jesus had been more like a false prophet, leading people astray from the true faith. And that first

impression led Paul to persecute the early Christian Church, those who followed Christ. But when the Risen, Living Jesus actually appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus (a story you find in the Book of Acts, chapter 9)—why, that momentous event created Paul’s second impression about Jesus and **that** impression triumphed over his first. Paul was born anew in faith toward Jesus Christ. So because of that event, Paul says he no longer regards **others** from a human point of view either. If they are in Christ, they are a new creation. Paul sees them anew. The old stuff that kept Paul and others separated from one another? The labels, the judgments, the critiques? They are gone, they are no more. Paul says now there can be the very real possibility of reconciliation with one another. All this because God has reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ.

It is not on a whim that Paul talks this way. This is Paul’s second existing letter to the young Christian Church in Corinth. There may have been additional letters than just the two we have in the New Testament, but they were either lost, or edited into these present letters. At any rate, Paul and the Corinthians have a long-term relationship. They have impressions of each other, and by the time of this letter, not necessarily good impressions. Apparently Paul had disappointed the Corinthians on a couple of levels—enough so that some members of the congregation and other visiting missionaries questioned his authority as an apostle. Paul understands their impressions, their judgments and critiques of him as this: The Corinthians are regarding him from a human point of view. He has to defend himself and his actions, his integrity and his commitment to the preaching and ministry he has done and is still doing. So Paul uses this letter as a forum for addressing how a community of faith lives in community. How brothers and sisters in Christ are to view one another. As much as the Corinthians hurt him through their criticisms, he still loved that congregation, and earnestly wanted to minister to it. So he says he no longer regards them from a human point of view—he knows first-hand how destructive and hurtful and wrong that can be. Instead, he sees each member of the church at Corinth as a new creation. He lets the hurt slide away, he knows the past has passed away because of the new life given in Christ. Everything—even his ongoing relationship with the Corinthian Church—has become new! This letter is filled with language about reconciliation, unity, fellowship, forgiveness, and new life.

And this letter, particularly this passage, is important for us who struggle to live in this faith community. We have our impressions of one another, and living and working together over time, we can find ourselves at odds with one another.

"He annoys me every time he opens his mouth."

"She's on that committee? Then I don't want to be on it!"

"They're not exactly the type of people I feel comfortable around."

"He's so negative. When I suggest something he's always saying why it can't be done."

"She walked past me in the Gathering Space and didn't say 'Hi.' What did I do to her?"

"Wait till I tell you what I heard about him! You won't believe it!"

"You know, she just doesn't fit in. She's not one of us."

Our impressions of one another will stick, unless something momentous occurs that creates a second impression that triumphs over the first. For congregational life is not easy. True community and fellowship are hard work and some days don't even seem possible.

I considered preaching on the Gospel lesson today—the story of the prodigal son, so familiar to many of us. But I know that story will come around again three years from now, and I can preach on it then. I'd like you to note, however, the introduction that informs us why Jesus told that story. Luke writes this at the beginning of chapter 15: *Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

See? The Pharisees and scribes were regarding those coming to Jesus our Lord from a human point of view. Their impression of the tax collectors and other assorted folk was that these people were unsavory and unclean. People who didn't belong in polite society or at worship in the temple. And when the Pharisees and scribes saw these sinners coming to Jesus, it made them regard Jesus from a human point of view, too. What kind of good Jewish teacher is he, to permit sinners to dine with him?

What they couldn't realize was that our Lord Jesus, all along, was not regarding those who came to him from a human point of view—no critique or label came from his lips. Jesus regarded them from God's point of view. Beloved—yes, troubled or tending to go astray, but still beloved. With all the possibility and potential of being a new creation. That's how Jesus looks at them, and that's what Jesus does for them. Makes them new. **He** is their momentous event that allows this second impression to triumph over the first.

Biblical scholars think Paul visited Corinth one more time after this letter was received by the congregation. But we don't really know the end result of their relationship. We can only hope Paul's honesty and encouraging words, and his regarding the Corinthians as new creations made a difference in how they spoke with another and treated one another. In spite of Paul's shortcomings... and theirs.

You see, I think it's fair to ask what would have happened if it turned out Susan Boyle **couldn't** sing. What if her voice was... merely adequate...or worse, awful? She would have been the laughing stock of "Britain's Got Talent." Simon Cowell would have had a field day. And perhaps it would have been another well-viewed YouTube moment. The first impression would stand.

But you and I and this congregation are **not** "Britain's Got Talent" or "American Idol." We are not to sit in judgment, feeling superior, like Simon Cowell. We are the Body of Christ, and Paul, who told the Corinthians in his first letter that they were the Body of Christ, all different parts working together, **now** tells the Corinthians in his **second** letter that they are a new creation. And they are to be reconciled to one another, as they are reconciled to God through Christ.

That's what makes this place different from any other organization or institution. You and I are called to regard one another as new creations. That requires an imagination. I'm not saying that we merely pretend the other is a new creation. I'm saying it requires an imagination that only comes from God—God's vision of what his world, his kingdom, his people will look like. Our own imaginations are deficient, warped, way too small. We need God's imagination, so that we will look at one another with the eyes of Christ, and discover a beautiful person with a beautiful gift to share. **AMEN.**