

“Everything Has Become New”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

I have talked to you before about a friend of mine. He was my mentor when I was in seminary and for the rest of his life. His name was Reverend Allan Montgomery. Allan was just a wonderful man. When I knew Allan, he had already been stricken with Parkinson's disease. In fact that is why I served under him when I was a student in seminary because while I didn't have a lot of experience or background or intellect, Allan had all of those. What he didn't have was my whirlwind of energy. So together he kept me moving in the right spots and I kept him moving along, so he got done what needed to be done, done. We worked great together and had a wonderful time.

I used to give him the hardest time, because I said, “Allan, life is not fair - because you were a pastor from the '40s through the '80s. You had it easy.” [Laughter] I said, “My life is miserable because I have it [the role of pastor] from the '80s until Lord knows when I'm going to retire and, when you were a pastor, people just showed up. They were knocking the doors down. They asked, “How can we come in?” Do you know what Evangelism was? “Here is the membership card; sign it. Here is your pledge card; now give.”

It worked.

I come along and all of a sudden that doesn't work anymore. Now, it's a little different in ministry. Now we have to work for it - and that is not fair. In a way I think this is actually not the time to be feeling frustrated, but [it is] a very powerful time in the life of the Christian church. People aren't showing up just because this is the church their boss goes to, or because it's expedient, or because it makes me look good.

You're here only because you have faith in God through Jesus Christ; otherwise there is no benefit to your being here anymore. Your boss doesn't care - it's not a socially beneficial thing to do, especially the younger you are. In fact, it is almost the other way: people look at you like, “Really? You go to church and waste an entire Sunday morning? You mean they ask you for money and it doesn't make you mad? You don't treat them like a political candidate asking for an extra few bucks? Why in the world are you doing that? I thought you were intelligent. You really believe that there is this super natural being that walks with you, and talks with you, and the rest of that hymn I can't remember? You really think this is what the world is like; that there is going to be an afterlife? Well that is kind of a crutch. I thought you were a stronger human being than that.”

That is what we are up against now. Fifty years ago that conversation happened very rarely. Some people may have felt it, but they didn't verbalize it like they do today.

When my friend Allan was in ministry, there was not an atheist organization anywhere to be found. Now they are the fastest growing group of organized religions there is right now. Think about it. Maybe - just maybe - this is the time that God has put us in, so that we can make a real difference, because there is honesty now that maybe there wasn't before.

I'm thrilled with the people that we have, not just at Westminster but every congregation that continues to come to gather in faith to pray, and believe, and make a difference. I can't go up to someone who has no faith and start talking to them either about why they should believe. First of all, it's going to turn them off as quick as you can imagine. All they are going to do is sit and argue with me. Half the time the people who don't believe seem to be able to talk circles around me. That is dangerous, so that you have to be careful that you don't dig a worse hole for God.

The one thing you can say is, “Alright.” (I said this to a friend of mine who is a born-again atheist and he is good at it). I said, “Alright, let's look at it this way. What if we took away every church in

the Des Moines area - just shut them all down. What would happen to the food bank? What would happen to the shelter? What would happen to the other hundreds and hundreds of not-for-profit ministries? (Whoops! Can't use that word anymore! They are all shut down.) All of the different organizations that care for people when they are not being fed by *organized* religion, because individually it is very difficult for individuals to get a lot accomplished?"

His response was, "Well, that's true. However, these people would organize under other things [organizations] that would be more powerful and meaningful."

I had to bite my lip until it bled, because I wanted to talk about the Holy Spirit, but knew that - you know that would just start an argument. So I said, "Really? That they are as passionate about it [another organization] as the people that come to Westminster, or First Federated, or Hope Lutheran, or Plymouth, or any other church in the area? They are going to be that *passionate* about what they are doing, as passionate as they are about their relationship with God and living it out in community?"

Pause. Pause. And I said, "Now, what are you going to do tomorrow if all of those churches are shut down and the shelter gets 17,000 people showing up at the door? [Who's going] to help?

"Well, alright," he said, "well, maybe, just maybe we will let those churches continue as long as they know their place, and don't get too pip-preachy."

That is kind of the way we left it.

We don't minister evangelistically well enough. Our lack of fervor, our ability to communicate with others who are struggling in faith, or who have lost their faith is our fault, not theirs. It's ours. Because for too long we have just assumed that the old pattern of ministry worked. The old pattern of ministry that they [prospective members] are just supposed to show up, get their pledge card and do their duty. It does not work that way anymore, and we have been slow to respond.

Now in this passage today it talks about becoming *ambassadors* of Christ, and I'm sitting here going "What in the name of all that is holy are 'ambassadors of Christ?'" I love it because it makes each one of us responsible for the ministry that is taking place." We can't just feel it in ourselves. We are dwindling in size as the "Christian" church and people are missing out on what we have and what God offers: the grace, the blessings, the hope - eternally, and it has already started here on earth right now; but especially mainline protestants have not figured out how to share it - out loud and without embarrassment - and that's why of all churches the mainlines have been dying the fastest. It is our fault. So what we need to do is spend some time together practicing, sharing our stories, and practicing saying out loud what we know here. I'm real good at feeling it, but sometimes it just doesn't come out here [speaking and sharing] as well. It doesn't formulate as well as it feels in my heart, and I don't think I'm alone.

So, we work over and over again - or should be - to be able to articulate faithfully what it is we believe and why we believe it; and then we nurture people where they are to take the baby steps of faith. I'm not an Evangelical or Fundamentalist, or any of those tag lines you want to use, for some denomination that expects you to have a moment where the lightning strikes, and I can name in my heart the minute - the second - when I was born again.

You know what? Sometimes I envy them. I wish I had such a moment that you say the minute you are born again. I would jump up and say, "Yes!" and here is the moment, here is the day and here is what happened: My life was awful before and now it is just perfect; but I'm Presbyterian.
[Laughter]

First of all we don't jump up about anything and get real excited. I love my grandmother's favorite line, she said it until the day she died, if anyone was rude enough to ask my grandmother if she was born again. Her response was always "yes, every morning that I get out of bed and my feet hit the

floor, I'm born again." And beyond the little silliness she meant by it was a lot of truth in it. It isn't a onetime thing; it happens every time that we reach up, reach out, reach in. In those moments God restores us, frees us from the bondage of sin and death, and brings us into the newness of life. That joy is incomprehensible and it isn't something that just happens once. It is renewed daily – hourly – almost always when we take the time to recognize it. We can feel great joy as ambassadors.

Now, for a number of years, I have been trying to figure out how to help people find out about their spiritual gifts, so that they know where they need to reach out to find their place. The church has tried it. (Oh, my, when I went to Waterloo there was some guy working on it.) It was Willow Creek Community Church - that was Hope Lutheran on steroids. It was out in Barrington, Illinois. It's one of the suburbs in Illinois. [The attendance at] this place went from zero to about 10,000 members in a week, and then it went up to 30,000 members and was a booming place in the '80s and '90s.

They did a lot of really good things and they are continuing to expand, I mean it's like locusts of faith. They are everywhere. Sometimes you can't avoid them and people would not move to Barrington, because they didn't want to be close enough to be caught up in the swarm. They were doing this thing about spiritual gift inventories, and you should work your church around it. It was like a 50-hour course, and then you had to do all of this other stuff. Well, no wonder it didn't work at Westminster in Waterloo, Iowa. It just didn't go over.

We tried this one and that one. I have never tried one that I quite liked until recently, but this one I'm wondering about. It is a half-hour survey. You find out what those ideas are - there are 34 of them - different personality types that you put together to make you. I said, "Well this is good, but some of these other personality profiles that I have experienced were just frankly - I know them. I know who I am, and most of you have a pretty good idea who you are; but there is such a uniqueness and distinctiveness about some of these personality profiles that I really like them because, they are so unique to you."

Paul, over and over again, talked about if all of us had an eye we wouldn't be able to be the body of Christ; and, if all of us were ears we would not be able to be the body of Christ - but knowing and acting on every part of our body, it takes *every* part of our body to function well in order to thrive.

In the personality profile that was developed by Gallop Research Polling (it is written by a wonderful man named Don Clifford who now wrote a series of these and we will be looking at them), called "Strength Finders." He develops this to the point where these 34 profiles - you find the five top ones [profiles] that are the most [like] you - and if you went around and looked for somebody who had the same five profiles, it would take looking at 275,000 people to find someone else with the same five [profiles] in any order. Think about that.

Now to find someone who had your same five talents in the same order, you would have to look for 33 million people to find someone with the same five in the same order as you. That tells me a couple of things: One, it tells me that it is not a rubber stamp of one-size-fits-all for everyone. These speak to an individual in a unique and authoritative way. And, number two, it also tells me that you are unique. We don't talk especially as Presbyterians about being special, because we were taught to be humble. If my grandmother gave me one passage of Scripture in her entire life it was, if you go pray - lock yourself in a room. Don't let anyone know that you are doing it, because the worst thing you can be is arrogant.

Yet, it is our humility that has kept us from sharing the Gospel as well as we could have. You go to some of these expanding, growing churches - whether they are liberal or conservative - and the one thing they are going to do is talk about *their* faith, *their* church, and *their* excitement. We could be every bit as excited; we could be doing every bit as much, but we don't talk about it. You should just figure it out.

When I do a funeral, I sit down with a family and say, "Tell me about your loved one." Odds are, if they [the deceased] are over 75 years old when they die, the family will say they were very faithful.

I say, "Really. Talk to me about their faith." [The family responds], "It was very private. [Laughter] We knew something was going on when the door was shut, but we were not quite sure what it was." [Laughter]

We do not have the privilege of being private with our faith anymore. We have a responsibility to shout it, because people are missing it. When they need it, we are the only ones - the eyes, the ears, the hands, the feet of Christ - and if we are sitting here like this [quiet] Christ could be missed, and that is the joy of what it is to be an ambassador.

So, friends, here is what we are going to do. Over the next six months we are going to start looking at some of this. We will put it into some small groups and we are going to take those tests, even though they may prove me wrong, take it [the test] and say, "See, Scott, this one is as awful as the one you took in Waterloo." I dare you. Then we are going to sit down because until you know yourself and your faith and you know how to articulate it, you don't have anything to share. We have to learn how to have faith language to share with others, so that they can accept their own, and they will learn their faith language through your example.

Now I love my Wednesday lectionary group that we study with at our 242 Wednesday program. There is one woman there who is a therapist, and I said, "Help me understand how in the world we can communicate, because you do that individually one-on-one with people all the time."

She said, "First, you cannot be judgmental. You have to accept them where they are. Listen."

But I said, "Yes. When I sit down with my atheist friend I love being judgmental because he is awful to me." [Laughter]

She said, "No. You actually have to listen."

"Alright," [I said], "But I'm a Minister. I'm paid to talk."

"No," [she said], "You have to listen. Number 3, you have to be patient."

I said that was not in my spiritual gift inventory. [Laughter]

She said that I needed to learn it.

[I responded], "Alright."

[She said], "You have to have genuine empathy for the person you are with, even if you disagree. The goal isn't to fit them into your category. It's to understand where they are coming from because until you do, you are going to be talking like this [gesturing cross-purposes], and our goal is to talk like this [gesturing prayerfully].

It is going to be hard, because we are not set up that way. We have all found the Presbyterian Church either through birth or because we like this [way of worshipping] - but we cannot do that anymore. We have so much to give, and Christ, through the Apostle Paul, has called you and I to be ambassadors, and ambassadors do not sit on their hands. They reach out in faith. That is the kind of church I think we all want to be part of - even when it's scary - and watch how the Spirit of God works, now and always.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen