

Are we really stuck with ourselves? Psalm 139, 2 Cor 5:14-17
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One night at dinner, when my son Chase was 7 years old, he turned to me and asked, "Mom, is it true that when I grow up, I can be anything I want in the whole-wide-world?" To which I said, "Sure sweetie, anything." He immediately got very excited and said, "Yes, awesome! Because I'm going to be an elephant. Wait, no! A giraffe! No, no, no! A dinosaur! Definitely a dinosaur." To which, of course, I then had to break the bad news: "Oh no sweetie, I'm so sorry, but you have to stay human." (Chase laid his head down on the table in defeat)

He wanted to be something that he wasn't.

I think this happens to all of us at some point; not the wanting to be a dinosaur bit, but the wanting to be something we're not. Maybe we want to be smarter than we are, or thinner, or more successful, or more outgoing, or maybe we just want to be more impressive than we feel. And advertisers have this figured out, right? Billions of dollars are made each day by selling us products that promise to make us more than we really are, to transform us into something different. If we'll just get this app, order that product, buy this device, book that vacation, buy this house, use that face cream, drive this car, try that diet, read this book... then, then you'll be happy. Then you'll finally be different.

But in 2 Corinthians 5, Paul makes a really different promise. He says, because the love of Christ urges us on, because our sins have been forgiven, because God is reconciling the whole world back to himself... well then, **"If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"**

But wait, there's no face cream I have to buy or pill I need take? New creation; are you sure Paul? That's quite a promise.

We live in a society that can't seem to believe a new creation is really possible. It just seems too good to be true. And even more, if there is any new creating to be done, we believe it's up to us to make happen. Many of us love that do-it-yourself hustle way

of life. And that's because our favorite mythology is that the self is a construction that we make on our own. We choose who we want to be, the life we will live. We determine our future, we pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.

If we'll just work hard enough, we can change all the things about ourselves we really don't like. Don't like your hair color? Change it. Sick of soccer practice? Try lacrosse. No longer interested in the major you chose in college? Pick a different one. Bored with the town you live in? Easy, just move. Frustrated by your family? Find a new one and start over.

But, sooner or later, after all the buying and striving and trying one new thing after another... we all come face to face with the truth that, **"no matter where you go, there you are."** Eventually, we realize that we are stuck with ourselves. The day comes when we wake up, wipe the sleep out of our eyes, look in the mirror, and who we see staring back at us is indeed the same person with the same flaws and weaknesses and blemishes as we've always seen.

And friends, that is because, we actually do NOT create our own lives. Certainly not by our choices and willpower. Sure, we might influence the shape of our lives in some ways, but the kind of transformation we most long for, that comes through an encounter with the love of God. It is the love of God that makes us whole, that gives us the new life we're really desperate for.

Paul promises that it is 'in Christ' that the old is gone and that we, by some miracle, become a new creation. But what he really means by "new" creation is actually a return to our true selves, to the person God created us to be in the beginning. In Christ we discover who we really are. This is what Paul is talking about when he writes that **"God was reconciling the whole world back to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them."** (2 Cor 5:19) This reconciling of the world back to God, is about putting things right again. It is about restoring to wholeness that which has been fractured. It is about returning us to who we were meant to be.

It is just as we heard the Psalmist declare a few moments ago in Pamela's reading of Psalm 139, *"God, you really know me. You know all my ways. There is nowhere I can go that you are not with me. You created my inmost being, you knit me together before the foundations of the world. God, you knew all the days ordained for me before even*

one of them came to be. I am wonderfully made.” Maybe for us, this returning to true selves, might feel like a brand-new thing, a new creation, as Paul calls it. But to God, this is who we were always meant to be.

But we all know the problem here, we’re a long way from the person God created us to be before the foundations of this world. Not only have we acted in ways that have separated us from our true self, but also, things have happened to all of us that have left us fractured and disconnected from who we once were. Paul uses the concept of sin to explain this. Now I know we tend to hate the word sin, and I get that. It’s a word that has been weaponized to hurt folks for centuries. But friends, sin is just anything that separates us from God. Anything. Sin can be (and often is) the choices we make that hurt ourselves and hurt others... but sin is also the choices that others make that go on to impact and hurt us. So yes, we all sin, but it is just as true that sin happens to us. Sin is so much less about personal moral failing and way more about this cosmic brokenness in our world.

And all of it serves to reduce our humanity, to distance us from who we really are. Dr. John Bowen put this well; **“Sin may tempt us to try to become more than we were made to be, but its effect is ultimately to make us less than who we were made to be.”**

But here is the incredible news... we’re actually not stuck with ourselves! The good news of the gospel challenges the assumption that human nature cannot change, by stating that God can indeed achieve such a transformation in Christ. The invitation from God is to return to who we really are, to accept the gift of grace that God offers us to shake off the old and step into life as a new creation.

But friends, this new creation life... you can’t do it on your own. it is all a gift. You can’t earn it. There’s no product to buy. No bootstraps to pull on. No amount of striving or hustling will make you new. And for all of us who’ve spent most of our lives really trying to do it on our own, we already know, that it doesn’t work. It is all a gift of God’s grace, all God’s action. In Ephesians, Paul makes this plain for us; **“God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our sins, made us alive together with Christ. For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of**

works, so that no one can boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” Ephesians 2

And if we dare accept this gift, this way of life... well then, as Presbyterian Pastor and author John Ortberg says, **“Here’s the good news: When you flourish, you become more you. You become more that person God had in mind when he thought you up. You don’t just become holier. You become you-ier. You will change; God wants you to become a “new creation.” But “new” doesn’t mean completely different; instead, it’s like an old piece of furniture that gets restored to its intended beauty.”** -John Ortberg I love that, you don’t suddenly become a totally different person... you actually become you-ier... more truly who you were made to be. Restored, or as Paul put’s it, reconciled. Friends, God’s love does not disconnect you from yourself or ask you to be someone you’re not. Never... God’s love will only, always bring you back to your true self.

If you read through C.S. Lewis’ incredible children’s series, The Chronicles of Narnia, you’ll eventually meet Eustace Scrubb in book 5. Eustace is the insufferable cousin of siblings; Susan, Peter, Edmond, and Lucy... and he’s a pretty tough character to like. He’s selfish, insecure, and cruel. Even Lucy, the nicest of the siblings, can barely stand to be around him. Eustace goes on a sailing journey with his cousins that eventually leaves them all shipwrecked on an island for some time.

On the island Eustace sneaks away to avoid helping the others repair the ship, but then he happens upon a dangerous dragon’s cave filled with treasure. He begins to think of all that the treasure could do for him. He eventually grows tired and falls asleep on the pile, his mind full of greedy and selfish thoughts. But when he wakes up, to his absolutely horror, he discovers that he’s been turned into a terrible dragon. Lewis writes, **‘Sleeping on a dragon’s hoard, with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself’**. For Eustace’s dragon form, was now a painful outward expression of what had always been on the inside of his heart.

Seeing what he’s become though, it forces him to begin to face the truth about himself. Wearing the terrible dragon scales, it becomes more and more painful with each passing day, and Eustace quickly realizes that he doesn’t actually like the person he’s become. He wants desperately to go back and make things right.

Things feel pretty hopeless. There seems to be nothing Eustace can do to change himself back into a human. But then one night he meets Aslan the Lion, who leads him to a pool of water that Eustace becomes desperate to get into—sure it will help ease the pain of the terrible dragon scales. But Aslan tells him that he can't get in the water yet... first, he must remove those ghastly scales.

Eustace remembers that dragons can shed their skin, so he scratches and scratches and eventually the dragon skin does begin to come off. Underneath, however, he finds just another terrible dragon skin, and then another and another. He eventually despairs, and says **"I thought to myself, oh dear, how ever many skins have I got to take off? ... So, I scratched away for the third time and got off a third skin, just like the two others, and stepped out of it. But as soon as I looked at myself in the water, I knew it had been no good."** No matter how many times he scratches, he can't seem to get them off.

But then Aslan the Lion says to him, "You can't do it on your own. You will have to let me do it." Eustace says, **"I was afraid of his claws, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So, I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it. The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was the pleasure of feeling the stuff finally peel off... Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off – just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt – and there it all was lying on the grass, only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking than the others had been."**

Well, then, the next thing Eustace knows, Aslan picks him up and throws him into the pool of water. Eustace says, **"It smarted like anything, but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious, and as soon as I started swimming and splashing, I found that all the pain had gone. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again."**

Anyone who is in Christ, is a new creation. The old things have passed away, all things have become new. Friends, this is the kind of life we are invited into. One where we exchange all our painful dragon scales and get to be human again, get to be the person we were made to be. Will it hurt to let go of all the stiving, of all the control, of

all the misguided pursuits for meaning... Yeah, it usually does sting quite a bit to let go of our false self. But you know what, it's actually a lot more painful not to.

But let's be honest, it doesn't happen overnight. Returning to our true self often takes time. In fact, even Eustace needed some time. Lewis writes, **"It would be nice, and fairly true, to say that, 'from that time forth Eustace was a different boy.' To be strictly accurate, he *began* to be a different boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of these I shall not notice. For, the cure had begun."**

All of which brings us back to where we began this morning. Sooner or later we all face the fear that we are stuck with ourselves. But friends, we are not. Because of the love of God in Christ Jesus, we are invited to be new. You can't be a dinosaur, but you can get back to who you really are... and that is even better. Amen.