

*If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

There is an expression that seems to be an apt description of many things in our world today: “everything old is new again”. We have even adopted the word, “retro” to describe things such as fashions, furniture design, architectural styles and more; things that look back and find their inspiration from what was, rather than being something that can be described as truly new and unique. Perhaps we are always stuck between the futuristic and the nostalgic: we want what is new and wonderful, but we keep looking back, longing for the days of old.

Maybe I am just old, but I do think some things were better in the past. Some styles and designs were more interesting, more practical, more user-friendly than some of the newer things which have replaced them. I keep hoping that I live long enough for the clothes that I like (and which I own) to come back into style. Some day my particular retro look will be chic, and I’ll be ready for it. But even if I long for things of the past, there are some things that are definitely better today. You can’t ignore the reliability of cars in years gone by, but I much prefer the aerodynamic and fuel efficient styles of today’s automobiles. My mother owned the same washing machine which worked reliably for 30 years before upgrading to a more modern machine that broke down and had to be replaced after 5 years. But I have no nostalgia for the ringer washer that mom used. I don’t want to go back to the slow, rotary-dial phones of the past. I like my computer much better than my old Smith-Corona typewriter. I even look forward to the evolution of computers to the point where I won’t have to type out the sermon each week; that voice recognition is so accurate that I’ll just be able to talk to the computer and it will fully and properly put my words on paper, because it will be able to work with me intuitively through the creative process.

We struggle, don’t we? We want new and wonderful, but we also long for the familiar, the comfortable, the “old” things. Any wife who has been trying to get her husband to part with that old jacket, or shoes or comfy chair knows that conflict all too well. Of course, that really isn’t all that earth-shattering an issue if we are talking about clothes or design or something similar. It does matter if we are talking about our spiritual lives. Yet even here we may long for the old ways, be drawn to the old ways, or even want to boast about the glories of our past lives. We may try to live in the past, rather than keeping our hearts focussed on the future that is ours in Christ.

That is why I want to ask, “What’s new with you?”

God, in His grace and mercy, has done something new and wonderful in you. Paul puts it this way: *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.* (Ephesians 2:4-7 - ESV) This is what’s new in us. We were dead. Sin had destroyed us. Because of sin, we were condemned to the eternal torment of hell. But God sent His Son to save us. He let Jesus suffer and die in our place. And God gives us new life in Christ, as we are raised with Christ, through the life that comes in His resurrection from the dead.

We often have requests to sing the hymn, *Amazing Grace*. The hymn was written by John Newton, once captain of a slave ship,

but later reborn by God's grace. Newton says it so well for all of us: *"I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see."* (LSB 744, st. 1) Unlike Paul, Newton could never boast about his old life. It didn't matter. In Christ, that old life was forgotten. Newton became a pastor. He rejoiced in the new life God gave him in Christ.

We see God working new things in the hearts of sinners like John Newton, Simon Peter, Mary Magdalene, Saul of Tarsus, Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, David Bode and each and every one of you gathered here today. How blessed we are to know that *if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.* (2 Corinthians 5:17 -ESV) In our Old Testament lesson today, God said through the prophet Isaiah: *"Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"* (Isaiah 43:18-19 -ESV) What God has done is to come to the rescue of dead and condemned sinners like you and me to work not only our rescue, but our deliverance from the old, empty and hopeless life that we have because of sin.

For Paul, the new life in Christ was a prominent theme. There was no nostalgia; no desire for a life that was 'retro'. Maybe that comes from the fact that Paul understood how the old ways of his life had done absolutely nothing for him. Here was a man who can speak of himself as *a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless.* There was a time when Paul was both proud of, and stuck in, the past. But no longer. As a new creation in Christ, Paul says: *But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

So, what's new with you? Are you caught up into that life that is yours as the redeemed, forgiven, baptized child of God? Or are you still stuck in the past? Let's face it, the devil's no dummy: he knows how to make us long for the old things, the comfortable things, things that we may even have thought of as enjoyable, even though we know they are wrong in the sight of God. The devil works hard to keep us from thinking of the new life we have in our Baptism. Luther says that our baptism *indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.* (SC, Baptism IV) But the devil wants to keep us pining for the old man. He wants us to want the old lusts and desires and interests. He wants anything that separates us from the new life we have in Christ.

St. Augustine wasn't always a saint; in fact, his life was once the exact opposite of the life we live in Christ. One day, shortly after his conversion, he was accosted on the street by a former mistress. He saw her and turned to walk in the opposite direction. Surprised, the woman cried out, "Augustine, it is I!" But continuing on his way, Augustine cried back, "Yes, but it is not I." Augustine understood what Paul was talking about. He knew the newness of life in Christ. How could he even begin to go back to the things that were part of the old life that he had apart from the grace and mercy of God?

That is what Paul also says. He knows that what he once held dear is actually rubbish and emptiness. By comparison with Augustine, Paul thought he was good—better than good—and didn't see his need for a Saviour. Yet his old life couldn't save him. It didn't give him the peace that he found in Christ. Now he has a new focus: *one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* Forget the old things in your life! Forget the sins of the past—God God has forgiven them! He nailed them to the cross, giving His Son to pay the price of them for you. Forget the things that used to think of as important, be it money, prestige, power, or even your church heritage. All these things pale in comparison to *the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus [our] Lord.* Forget the times of indifference or self-righteousness, and press on toward the goal. Forget the times you didn't live as a child of God. Forget—and then press on to that prize that is already yours in Christ. Press on to the fulness of all that is yours through the dying and rising Saviour!

So, what's new with you? I have to believe that since you are here this morning, Christ is new with you—and by the power of His Holy Spirit, you are called and brought into that new life we have in Him. Don't get stuck in the past! Baptized into Christ, grab onto that new life you have each day through the Spirit's power. Rejoice that when we fall back into the past, sinful ways that the love of Christ is greater than our sins, and that His sacrifice covers even those sins. Free in Christ, we don't go on living in sin; rather we overcome it by His grace. And *press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* Amen.