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New Living Translation, 2 Co 5:16–17

So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! ¹⁷ This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

Big lessons come with coffee ice cream.

I grew up in southern California, but both of my parents grew up on the east coast. My parents didn't have much money for travel, so as a result, I grew up with very little contact with my parents' families. When I was a young boy, I met my mother's parents for the first time.

It was the summer of 1967. My parents, my older brother and sister, and I drove across country in my dad's '67 Chrysler Fury III. When we got to Massachusetts, the three of us kids were split up, and over the next few weeks, we were traded off among various relatives of both of my parents. One day, I was sent to stay with my mother's parents, and my sister, who had just spent a couple

of days with them, was sent off to another relative. My grandpa DuBois was shocked when he learned that I had never had coffee ice cream, and so he put me in his pickup truck to go get some.

We stopped at an ice cream stand. What I really wanted was chocolate ice cream, but my grandfather insisted on getting me a cone of coffee ice cream. As we pulled away in his truck, I tried the ice cream - which I found disgusting. Meanwhile, my grandfather counted the change he had just gotten from the young female cashier.

Now, I have to admit that when my grandfather wasn't looking, I held the ice cream cone out the window and turned it upside down, dumping the ice cream on the road.

As we drove along, my grandfather started to curse. He held the change in his hand, yelling that he'd been cheated, that he hadn't gotten all the money back he was supposed to get. *"That girl Jewed me,"* he proclaimed. *"She stole some of my change!"*

We drove on, with him continuing to shout about how he had been cheated and yelling that the girl was a Jew.

Later, when he saw that all that was left of my ice cream cone was the cone, he asked me how it was. The ice cream was great, I told him.

That evening, I happened to cross paths with my sister at another relative's home. My sister was three years older than me, but four years ahead of me in school. As I sat in front of a TV with my sister, I asked her what a Jew was.

"What's a Jew?" she said, "Buzzy, you know what a Jew is. A Jew is a Jewish person. Jesus was a Jew."

"I guess he was," I said.

"Yeah, Jesus was just a regular guy and he was a Jew."

"But, I said. "I don't mean that kind of Jew. It must be one of those words that sounds the same but is really two different words."

"You mean a homonym," she said. "Like blood is red and I read a book."

"Yeah," I said. "That's what I mean."

"Well, Buzzy," answered my sister, "I don't know any other word that sounds like Jew."

"I mean the kind of Jew," I said, "that steals your change."

“Oh,” said my sister thoughtfully, “I see. You’ve been talking to Grandpa DuBois, haven’t you?”

My sister had already interacted with Grandpa DuBois and had heard him say similar things. She proceeded to tell me all about anti-Semitism and why Grandpa was calling the cashier at the ice cream stand a Jew. It was all news to me. I had grown up going to Catholic schools and was very naïve about such issues. I simply wasn’t familiar with the idea of someone accusing an entire ethnic group of people of being evil or inferior.

It was also the first time that I thought about Jesus as being a regular Jewish guy. The sisters taught us that he was the son of God, that he was our Savior, that he was our Lord. But now, for the first time, I considered this more complex image of Jesus as both a human and God.

I’m going to get back to my anti-Semitic grandfather.

Let’s consider our brief Bible passage today. It’s very famous. It’s from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. There are thirteen letters in the New Testament that are attributed to Paul. Some scholars believe that Paul wrote seven of them personally, but that other people wrote the other six in his name.

However, the Corinthian letters are in the group that virtually no one questions. Paul did indeed write this letter.

Corinth was a major commercial center during the time of Jesus and the Apostles. The people there were not Jews; they were what we used to call pagans, people who worshipped a variety of Greek gods. In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing back to a church that he had established there on his second mission trip. The church there was filled moral and doctrinal problems, and Paul is trying to get them to clean up their act.

In the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing to tell the people there how glad he is that most of them have changed their ways and have become good Christians. But he is also admonishing the few who have not yet come around to his teachings.

Consider our passage. The primary focus of this passage is that when we become faithful Christians, we become new people. Our old selves are gone. I'm going to talk about someone who did something wrong and then made a commitment to begin again as a new person in Christ.

But first, here's why I wanted to emphasize that Paul really did write these two letters, that they were not written in his name by someone else. You see,

there is a second - and more subtle - message in this passage. Paul seems to be referring to himself when he says that “we” used to see Jesus as just a man, but now we see him differently, in a more complex way. Remember that Paul at one time had been Saul, and that he had persecuted Christians. But on the Road to Damascus, he was blinded and met the risen Christ. He learned that the man Jesus was also the son of God Jesus.

This lesson of seeing Jesus as both a man and a deity is the same lesson I learned as a result of my grandfather’s tirade against Jews. But, in my case, I was moving from the other direction, learning to look at Jesus as not just the son of God, but also as a man who suffered a gruesome death to be my savior.

It was a big day of learning for me. As I sat in front of a TV talking to my big sister, I also learned about bigotry and bias.

The two lessons – the duality of Jesus and the grim truth about bigotry - are related, of course. Paul was writing about how, if we see Jesus as more than just a man who made wild claims about himself and was crucified as a result, we will be transformed. And in turn, of course, we will be good to all people. This man who was also God taught us about universal love and the dangers of hatred.

Today is a big day for me. It's my first day here, my first sermon. I'm hoping to learn a lot here. Everyone here has a lot to teach me, I'm sure.

But, big lessons aren't always accompanied by big events. Sometimes it's simple things in simple moments that can cause us to learn and to change in major ways. A trip to get an ice cream cone with my grandfather opened a much bigger world for me, a world that was part evil and part blessed. I learned that he was an anti-Semite and I learned that Jesus really did come to this planet as a simple human being – and that he did it for me.

Now, what about my grandfather?

While we were still in that pickup, before I met up with my sister and taught me about bigotry, I offered to count his change for him. He handed it over to me. As I ate my empty cone, I did some arithmetic – and I informed my grandfather that he had gotten exactly what he was supposed to get.

He simply shrugged and kept driving.

I saw him a day or so after I talked to my sister about homonyms and anti-Semitism. I was back at his place. Thankfully, he did not treat me to coffee ice cream again. I reminded him that he had called that woman a Jew because he thought she had cheated him.

I told him that Jesus was a Jew.

I wasn't a kid who stood up to adults and I wasn't trying to challenge my grandfather. I didn't really know him. I was just puzzled by his behavior and I was looking to see if he was truly a terrible person.

But here's a little bit of context that turned out to be critical. His wife, my mother's mother, was still alive, but I hadn't been able to talk to her. The reason was that she had had a stroke - and half of her body was paralyzed. She was extremely weak and the most she could do was offer me a flickering half-smile.

So, what did my grandfather do after I reminded him that Jesus was a Jew? Well, he sat down on a chair. He nodded at me thoughtfully. Then his eyes teared over. He told me that he wasn't a mean person, that he was just under a lot of stress with his wife being so sick, and that he was very afraid he would lose her. That fear, he explained, had caused him to be hateful.

I was indeed just a boy and had not yet lost any important person in my life. It was at that moment that I went through another transformation. The thought that my grandmother might die soon settled into my mind. I didn't know her. But she was my mother's mother. She might die.

And as he sat there in front of me, my grandfather also asked Jesus Christ to forgive him and to help him start over with his relationship with his grandson.

So, a trip for some disgusting coffee ice cream taught me a lot. I learned about bigotry. I developed an appreciation for Jesus as both man and God. I grappled for the first time with the idea that people can lose other people, and that this can be devastating. But the biggest outcome of this ice cream trip is that I saw my grandpa start a new life in Christ. He saw something in himself that he didn't like. And I witnessed something that would impact me for the rest of my life. My grandpa turned something evil into something blessed for his grandson.

I'd like to end with a brief prayer.

God, this is a special day for me, my first Sunday as a pastor. Please keep your hand on my shoulder and your mouth to my ear as I serve this church.

In James 1:17 we are told that every good and perfect gift is from above. Being placed as the pastor of this church is indeed a gift from above.

Please bless and watch over every member of this congregation, their family members, friends, coworkers, and neighbors. Help all of us here at First United Methodist of Pierce support one another and be a shining representative of Jesus Christ in this community.