

“Mud and All”

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

Boys seem to be attracted to mud as steel is attracted to a magnet.

At least that was my experience in North Plainfield. The construction of new houses in our neighborhood meant that there were several large piles of dirt that turned to mud after every rainstorm – and became our favorite playgrounds. At the end of one of our play sessions, we would come home caked in mud, a sight that no parent wanted to see. But in spite of our outward appearance, our parents still lovingly welcomed us home – even though we had to take our clothes off in the garage and be hosed down in the back yard before we were allowed in our houses. No matter how we appeared, we knew our parents loved us – mud and all. They did not look at us “from a human point of view,” but as the children they so dearly loved.

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view ...”

St. Paul was well aware that the Christians in Corinth were being judged by their outward appearance, which had led many to dismiss their faith in Jesus Christ as of no importance. He acknowledges that *“not many of you were wise by human standards, not many of you were powerful, not many were of noble birth.”* (1 Corinthians 1:26). The inferior manner in which they were judged by those outside of the church was a reflection of the “human point of view” in which Christ himself was judged. Even though he was *“true God, begotten of the Father in eternity”* (*Small Catechism*), Christ did not *“regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”* (Philippians 2:6-7). Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering servant who *“had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we help him of no account.”* (Isaiah 53:2-3).

- “Paying too much attention to outward appearances – his itinerant and homeless lifestyle, his eating with sinners, his emphasis on love rather than the externals of the law – led some to view [Jesus] as a deceiver, a lawbreaker, or a revolutionary, who received his just desserts on the cross.” – Eugene Teselle.

Yet this Suffering Servant who was “despised and rejected” is the one who is the true Lord and Saviour, at whose name *“every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* (Philippians 2:10-11).

As Christ had once been regarded from a “human point of view,” so also were his followers often judged as harshly. Paul himself once regarded the followers of Jesus as heretics following a false Messiah, apostates who deserved to be thrown into prison or killed. As Saul of Tarsus, he presided over the martyrdom of Stephen and *“was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.”* (Acts 8:3). Paul describes it as a time when *“I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it ... for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.”* (Galatians 1:13-14). But all of this changed when the risen Christ encountered Paul on the road to Damascus:

- “Paul learned in a dramatic way how completely wrong human judgment can be. In what seemed to be foolishness – God’s Messiah suffering a humiliating death – God was at work to reconcile the world to himself and to make all things new.” – Elisabeth Johnson.

Paul had learned and proclaimed that Christ's death is the transformative event in all of life; nothing is the same after that. First among the radical changes brought about by the death and resurrection of Christ is the way people should live: *"no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."* (2 Corinthians 5:15). Our response to our being *"justified by faith apart from works required by the law"* (Romans 3:28) is to devote our lives to living in thanksgiving and devoting ourselves to walking as children of the light:

- "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true." – Ephesians 5:8-9.
- "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments." – 1 John 5:2.
- "And all of this [God] does out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true." – *Small Catechism*.

As Paul's view of Christ and Christ's followers was radically transformed after his encounter with our Lord on the road to Damascus, so also is the way we look at others transformed when we are transformed by Christ in the waters of Holy Baptism, when we are *"reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ."* (ELW Holy Baptism). We no longer look at others *kata sarka*, "according to the flesh," for to consider anyone "from a human point of view" is to view that person as if the fundamentally transformative resurrection of Christ had not taken place:

- "Believers are not simply offered a new perspective they may or may not adopt as and when they see fit; rather, something so fundamental has changed in such a profound fashion that the old ways of looking, perceiving, understanding, and, more profoundly, evaluating, have to be let go and replaced with a new way of seeing and understanding." – J. Paul Sampley.

Those who are in Christ will discover that our view of all people is transformed by the love of God that is ours in our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection: *"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new."* (5:17). Paul's language of new creation (*kaine ktisis*) echoes the language of Isaiah, where along with the restoration of God's people, God promises a new heaven and a new earth:

- "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind." – Isaiah 65:17.
- "For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, will remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your descendants and your name remain." – Isaiah 66:22.

The "new creation" is as drastic as the original creation, since it can only come from God and is a voluntary act of sheer grace. It is through our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection that we have been given *"a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you"* (1 Peter 1:3-4). It is through this "new birth" that our Lord has given us a new identity and a new purpose and mission:

- "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." – 1 Peter 2:9-10.

Because we have been born anew through our baptism into Christ and are therefore God's new creation, we have the assurance that God looks upon us as a loving parent looks upon their children, even when they are

covered with mud, even when they have been a failure or a disappointment, even when they have not lived up to expectations. Jesus welcomed all persons – even those who were judged as sinners and outcasts by others – because he saw them not from a human point of view but through the loving eyes of God who *“so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.”* (John 3:16).

- “When Jesus loved a guilt-laden person and helped him, he saw him as an erring child of God. He saw in him a human being whom his Father loved and grieved over because he was going wrong. He saw him as God originally designed and meant him to be, and therefore he saw through the surface layer of grime and dirt to the real man underneath. Jesus did not *identify* the person with his sin, but rather saw in this sin something alien, something that really did not belong to him, something that merely chained and mastered him and from which he would free him and bring him back to his real self. Jesus was able to love men because he loved them right through the layer of mud.” – Helmut Thielicke.

When the Waiting Father saw his Prodigal Son coming up the road toward home, he didn’t notice the muck from the pig sty where he had once worked. He didn’t see the stain of his disobedience or the grime of his profligate lifestyle in which he squandered his inheritance. Instead, all the father saw was the son who *“was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”* (Luke 15:24). It is through the same eyes of love that our Heavenly Father looks upon each of us as we have come into God’s presence this morning. We have come to this place as I returned home from our neighborhood mud pile, covered in the muck and mire of our sinfulness, our faithlessness, and our constant turning our backs on God. We come into God’s presence confessing that *“we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.”* (ELW Confession and Forgiveness). But we do not come into God’s presence fearful that God will reject us, uncertain if God will forgive us, or doubtful that God could ever accept us back as God’s children. Instead, we return to the Lord who we know is *“gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”* (Joel 2:13) confident that *“if we confess our sins, [God] who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* (1 John 1:9).

- “Confession consists of two parts. One is that we confess our sins. The other is that we receive the absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God himself and by no means doubt but firmly believe that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.” – *Small Catechism*.

Karl Barth, one of the great theologians of the 20th Century, was once asked if he would identify the most profound truth that he had learned from his studies. Without hesitation he replied, *“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”* We know that our Lord loves us unconditionally because the Word of God that comes to us in Holy Scripture is the Gospel of grace, which assures us that our Lord loves us freely, fully, unconditionally – mud and all.

- “I cannot moderate my definition of grace, because the Bible forces me to make it as sweeping as possible. God is ‘the God of all grace,’ in the apostle Peter’s words. And grace means that there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God’s family.” – Philip Yancey, *What So Amazing About Grace?*

As our loving God also looks upon us as beloved children, so also are we called to look upon each other “no longer from a human point of view” but through the same “grace-healed eyes” that sees beyond outward appearance to a person’s true identity as once who has also been born anew to a living hope through their baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ. As we seek to “thank and praise, serve and obey him” in gratitude for all that God has done for us, we are called to obey Christ’s commandment to *“love one another as I have loved you.”* (John 15:12). To love a person *“means to see him as God intended him to be”* (Fyodor

Dostoevsky). It means to look beyond outward appearances – the mud and grime, the flaws and imperfections, the faults and failings – and to see a person for who they truly are: someone who is a beloved child of God, someone who God so loved that he gave his only Son, someone who is a precious in God’s eyes as we are. In the same manner, *“a grace-full Christian is one who looks at the world through ‘grace-tinted lenses.’”* (Yancey). As God loves each of us *“poor, wretched, blind; sight, riches, healing of the mind, yea, all I need, in thee I find, O Lamb of God I come, I come.”*

- *“Paul reminds us that human standards of judgment count for nothing in God’s eyes. The scandal of the cross is that God chooses vulnerability, weakness, suffering, and death in order to bring new life ... Christ died for all, so that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised for us. In Christ we have a new creation, even in our weakness and vulnerability. We are reconciled to God and entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation as agents of God’s reconciling love for the world.”* – Johnson.

I’m sure that the sight of me covered in mud would not have been welcomed by everyone in my childhood neighborhood. If I had approached one of the other houses on the block after playing in the mud all afternoon, chances are all that the people inside would have seen was a filthy boy who would only mess up their nice clean houses. I don’t think I would have been warmly welcomed in any other home. But because my parent loved me – mud and all – they saw through the layer of grime to their beloved son. It’s not that they were happy that I was so filthy, nor did they encourage me to go back to the mud pile; but even when I did inevitably find myself sliding down those muddy hills, I knew that my parents’ love was sure and certain, because they did not look upon me from a “human point of view” but through the eyes of parental love.

As I would invariably find myself covered in mud, we constantly find ourselves covered in the muck and mire of sinfulness, constantly turning away from God and living in disobedience to God’s commandments. But even when we turn our backs on God, God never gives up on us; indeed, God’s love is so at the heart of God’s very being that God cannot give up on us: even *“if we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.”* (2 Timothy 2:13). Jesus is always calling us *“softly and tenderly”* to come home, where God will always welcome all of God’s beloved children – mud and all. Amen.