

How God Makes All Things New
Lessons: John 13:31-35, Revelation 21:1-5

We run most of our lives on automatic. We do most things without thinking – and that is a good thing for the most part. We don't have to concentrate and ask ourselves how to open a door or answer the phone. We have programmed ourselves through repetition and habit. We do some things without thinking so that we are free to think about more important things.

Great musicians have freedom to express emotion in the moment, because they have spent hours training their eyes to recognize the notes and their fingers to strike the right keys. They imagine a video clip of the way they are supposed to move their hands, then they practice it over and over again until they can do it without thinking about it. When the technique becomes second nature, they are free to focus on the music instead of the notes. Learned skill becomes habit, but music can only happen when we can focus on something beyond the notes.

Athletes do the same thing: players may be born with quickness or strength, native instincts to anticipate, but they never progress without the work of daily repetition and drill. As gifted as he was, LeBron James is a lot better than he was now than when he first stepped on a basketball court. Hours of practice have freed him to play a better game.

The process applies to most everything: pure vision | good technique | intentional practice | repeated habit | ingrained pattern | freedom to perform.

I

So, how could something that is supposed to make things so easy be so impossible – and frustrating? Why can a 10-year-old program a TV recording on the DVR, and we can't remember which button on the remote changes the channel?

Well, there is a complication. Ten year olds don't have to un-program their mind from the old way to learn the new way. Our real problem is that we don't realize we are programmed to old ways and cannot even see the new ways. Ask any musician or athlete. The hardest thing is to unlearn a bad technique that has become a bad habit. Replacing the old way with a new way can be so painful that we will choose to keep doing the old way until the cost is so high that we just have to change whether we like it or not.

Tim Tebow is an obvious example. He was a University of Florida quarterback, broke most every NCAA record for passing, and won the Heisman trophy winner as a sophomore. He is an all-around good guy and great role model. But he grew up so strong as a passer that he developed a bad habit early in his throwing motion. It has made him suspect for the pro draft. His old way of throwing a football – with all his success – had the potential to cost him so dearly that he went to work erasing his old, sub-conscious habit. In a few months, he got better technique and lots of repetitions building a new habit. It is not completely ingrained pattern yet, but he has made enough progress to earn a much higher than expected pick in the draft.

We all get the point. We all have some kind of bad habit or old perspective or maybe even a character flaw that we are just not going to give up until the cost is so high that we will go through the pain and trouble to work at a new skill. Even when we know we ought to, and even

when we know how good life could be once we have a new way, we resist. And we can slip so easily back into the old habit.

We have good company with this old problem: Paul said, “I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” [Romans 7:19] What makes us different from Paul is at least Paul admitted he kept doing the wrong thing. Most of us know something is wrong, but refuse to admit it to ourselves. We keep doing the wrong thing and think that there is something wrong with everything around us. And that, my Presbyterian friends, is the definition of a depraved mind. It is spiritual insanity to keep repeating our ingrained, sinful patterns in our actions and relationships with others, and all the while think that others are the ones that need to do the changing.

II

Revelation is a book about a world that is stuck in its old ways – an insane world with old patterns of self-centeredness and evil and deadly sin. Revelation is a fanciful story that tries to picture the cost of bad habits and unconscious patterns on the scale of great powers and spoiled humanity. It is a parable of the way that evil will to its best to persist, and it tends to think the problem is someone else and how much they need to pay.

Roman powers saw the rising unrest in this group of Christian rebels who did not live by Christ’s rules instead of Caesar’s. Sooner or later, these upstart trouble makers were blamed for most of the ills of society, and they had to be stopped. Persecution was just the regrettable cost that might force these Christians to give up new ways and revert to the old ways of the empire. And if persecution was not successful, then death would end the movement. The Romans were very effective at making others pay for their sins.

Revelation is also a testimony to keeping faithful to new ways in the face of the cost of opposition from power and sin. Throughout history, lots of people in the church have studied Revelation to find hidden clues about the end of the world or the mark of the beast – and they have missed the point of the writing completely. It is a poetic picture of great evil and amazing visions of a future of God’s rule. Every time the beasts of evil rise in power, the answering vision of a new heaven and a new earth comes. God’s vision will not be defeated. In the end, Jesus wins.

Revelation is the answer to Paul’s problem of not being able to overcome his old habits. He can’t, but Christ will. Paul knew that in the middle of his weakness and struggle with sin, the real hope was that “nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” In the end – and the middle – Christ’s love wins, even for us.

The vision from the beginning to the end of Revelation is that the new heaven and new earth come from God, and God has the power to make all things new. God is in the middle of the mess, *making* all things new. The powers of Roman Caesars and the power of our old patterns of sin will cost God, but God is already winning these battles. In the cross and resurrection, Jesus is already Lord of earth and heaven. Evil just has not surrendered yet. The great promise is that God is making all things new – not someday will make all things new, maybe, – but now in these moments, God is at work making everything new, the whole creation new, making you a new creation.

Revelation is the parable of the power that Christians had to stay faithful unto death, because they saw a pure vision of the crown of life. They kept the different vision that caused them to live with daily choices until they repeated habits of faithfulness that became ingrained patterns of living. They saw the image of Christ, and they worked at living to the image. Even when the cost was high, they kept the faith and kept faithful. They practiced the faith intentionally. They saw that Christ had endured a cross for the joy that was set before him. So, they had an example in his pattern and they had reasons to live to new habits.

III

We sing the hymn that is a prayer: ‘I was blind but now I see.’ There is amazing power of grace in the risen Lord. It is not just that we see; it is that we are able to see that once we were blind. We had old sight and thought we could see, but now we start to see the way Christ sees. The real question for us is simple: HOW do we get that new vision? HOW does God make all things new?

Jesus performed a miracle that shows how we get new vision. Remember the blind man and how Jesus mixed up some mud and put it on his eyelids? He went and washed, and could see, but everything was upside down! He came back to Jesus for a second touch that turned his vision right side up.

God puts mud on our eyes to show us they are closed and we did not know it. God gives us enough discomfort with our sins that we finally do something to wash them. Somehow, we finally admit to ourselves what everyone else has known for a long time. The blindness is us, not them. We had our eyes closed, or our minds closed, or our spirits closed. We were content, and did not even know we could not see, or we see – just upside down.

On our family’s first visit to Rocky Mountain National Park, we were looking out at Long’s Peak from high up Trail Ridge Road. There are a lot of great views, but none better than that one. I asked Jenna what she saw, and she said, “I see blues and whites and greens.” It was the first time we realized that our 10 year old could not see distances. She thought she could see, because blue and green was all she had ever seen. The next year we were back and parked at the same overlook. I asked Jenna what she saw now, and she said, “Now I can see the mountains and the snow and the trees.”

Jesus must have put this commandment in front of his followers over and over again: Love others the way I have loved you. They all thought they could love, but they loved the old way they had been taught and practiced. Jesus knew their vision was blurry. They were looking for love, but they needed glasses. They needed a second touch – a clear picture of love in action that they could practice until the second touch became second nature.

And when we see all blurry and upside down, God keeps putting the video clips of Jesus in action in front of us until we see right side up, and start practicing what we see. We see the way Christ’s love is different, and we love in new ways and become new. It is a pure vision, but it requires good technique and intentional practice.

Church is a practice place. It is a safer place to try to put new visions into practice. It is less scary to try new things out with friends. We have to go back to the vision of Jesus until we see it clearly. We have to read the text until we get the whole picture of his pattern, then we make the choices to do what he did until it becomes a habit by the repetition of doing it his way instead of

our old ways. We work at imagining what he would do, and we do it. We can't automatically think we are followers. We have to be intentional about following until we get good enough at it that we have confidence and skill. We live the new life with each other, and we encourage each other to open eyes and keep looking until we see things right side up. Ingrained habits become unconscious patterns, and we find ourselves loving others like Christ loves us. And we know joy and freedom in him.

So we sing the hymns, and we pray in song that God will wash away the blindness of our past. We ask God to open our eyes to see visions of true, pure love. We pray that Christ would be our vision, that God would be our best thought day and night and guide our actions night and day, that Christ's thoughts would be our thoughts until his heart would be our own heart. How is God making all things new? Christ is making us new when we work at doing the one thing he told us to do: Love others the way he loves us. Giving up the old way is what is hard. Living the new way is really easy, because we know that in the end Jesus wins – even with us!