

Beside ourselves (2 Corinthians 5:16-21)

Paul says something really crazy here.

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For some strange reason, there are some words that we tend to ignore when reading Scripture, even though we constantly use them in everyday life. One such word is *therefore*.

In daily life, we would never say simply, "Therefore I will not be there." There has to be an antecedent, a reason why I will not be there. Yet we come to a passage such as the Great Commission, and we often pay no attention to the *therefore* in "Go ye therefore . . ."

Such is the case with our text from 2 Corinthians. If we read it carefully, we see that at the beginning there is a *therefore*. This gives us a hint that we have to look back to see why Paul says what follows.

Were we to do this, we would find a long sequence of the words *therefore* and *so*, a sequence that begins way back in the epistle. Without going that far, the few preceding verses give us the immediate context of what Paul is saying.

Apparently, he has been accused of making sense sometimes and, on other occasions, acting or speaking as a crazy fanatic. "If we are beside ourselves, it is for God," he says. "If we are in our right mind, it is for you" (5:13). He then explains this strange behavior on the grounds that the love of Christ constrains him, for the death of Christ means that all have died.

Now this is really crazy. He is telling the Corinthians that they all are dead!

This basic craziness is the foundation for what follows in this passage. First of all, we now see everybody—including Christ himself—in a different way. But what is craziest of all is that not only do we see others in a different way, but there is an entire new creation!

This is so crazy that most earlier translations read verse 17 as saying that if anyone is in Christ that *individual* is a new creation. Now, that makes sense! But the NRSV is closer to the meaning of the original: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” Paul is not just saying that believers are new creatures, nor even that they see the world differently, but that everything is in fact new. No wonder the Corinthians feared that he was beside himself!

And yet this craziness is at the heart of the gospel. As Paul sees things, the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ have cosmic dimensions. In our passage Paul does not say that God was in Christ reconciling *believers* with God, but rather that “in Christ God was reconciling *the world* to himself.” And this to such an extent that “everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.”

Paul acknowledges that this is not so for everybody. It is only those who are “in Christ” who can see that there is a new creation—that the old, no matter how powerful it might seem, is dead. The present order of society, the values by which we live, the things on which we pin our hopes, they are all dead! This is the reason why believers, like Paul, sometimes seem to be “beside ourselves”—because even while living in the present order we seek to live as those who know that it is dead, and to live, think, and act as those who know that there is a new creation much more real and powerful than the old.

Perhaps sometimes we are called, like Paul, to be “beside ourselves” because we have the vision and even some experience of the new creation. And when, like Paul at other times, we are “in our right minds” this is for others, working within the old creation and its order but in the service of the new creation and its values.