

“Beyond ‘Used To Be’” (1 Corinthians 6:11) Epiphany 2, January 18, 2009

Over the years, I have received many interesting gifts. This fossil is one of that has special meaning to me. I wish you could see it up close. It's really very beautiful. But do you know what it is? Dinosaur dung. Petrified dinosaur dung. It was given to me when I was going through a really tough time, and as strange as this may sound, I keep it to remind me of an important spiritual truth: *that over time God can turn even the worst stuff into something beautiful!*

Not quite what you expected to hear in a sermon? At least, not a sermon of mine? Okay. But please don't miss the point, because it goes right to the heart of our Christian faith. No matter who we've been, no matter what we've done, no matter how far we've sunk or strayed, God is able to turn our lives into something beautiful. He is! Not necessarily “something easy,” mind you. And not necessarily “something successful” – at least, as the world counts success. But beautiful? Yes! A life that will shine in the light of eternity! A life that will show how much grace can accomplish! In fact, God can turn our lives into something **“abundantly far more” beautiful “than all we can ask or imagine!”** And here's the best part: *God wants to do that!*

Of course, spiritual growth does take time – lots of time. And there are things that can get in the way – lots of things! And among the things that can get in the way, one of the most troublesome is our attitude. Now, all of us recognize this. The longer we've been Christians, the more we recognize it! But one piece of the attitude problem we may not recognize has to do with self-image – how our self-image can limit our growth, especially if we see ourselves stuck with what we **“used to be.”**

You know what I mean. We look in the mirror, and regardless of what actually appears there, we see ourselves stuck in old roles we once played, trapped by old choices we once made – what we **“used to be.”** We see ourselves irreparably damaged by old hurts, old failures; forever limited by old mistakes, old lifestyles – what we **“used to be.”** We look in the mirror, and regardless of what actually appears, we just see damaged goods: *“That's what I am, it's what I've always been, and it's all I'm ever going to be”* – what I **“used to be.”** And friends, this self-image problem is not just sad. Spiritually, it's a real problem, because defining ourselves by what we **“used to be”** becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we believe, *“That's what I am, it's what I've always been, and it's all I'm ever going to be,”* we'll stay stuck there. Stuck regardless of our potential for growth; stuck regardless of how much God wants us to become.

Just to illustrate, suppose a young boy has great potential for basketball. He's got the height, he's got the grace, he's got the natural instincts, and he's got every opportunity to develop them. But suppose one day he's out there playing a crucial game, and in his excitement he accidentally shoots for the wrong basket. Suppose he makes it; scores two points for the other team. And suppose his

team loses...by one point. Can you imagine what he'd see in the mirror after the game is over? *What a loser! What a dufus!* Now, hopefully this boy would be able to put the mistake behind him and move on. But what if he didn't move on? What if he got stuck there? What if he kept seeing himself as a loser, a dufus? Then all his great potential wouldn't mean diddly, would it? He could grow up to be seven feet tall, with the grace of a gazelle, and the natural instincts of a superstar, but it would never get developed – not if he kept defining himself as a loser, as a dufus; not if his self-image stayed stuck at what he **“used to be.”**

And the same can happen in our spiritual lives. God *wants* to turn our lives into something beautiful, and God can certainly do that. His power and possibilities are endless! But for growth to happen, we need to *believe* it can happen – which is incompatible with believing we're stuck with what we **“used to be.”** Either we believe in God's possibilities or we believe in our impossibilities. Either we believe God can change our lives or we believe our lives cannot change. Either/or. Self-image is crucial! When it comes to growth, so much depends on how we choose to see ourselves – either as children of God becoming all we are meant to be, or as people who are stuck with what we **“used to be.”**

No one knew this better than St. Paul. We can well imagine how easy it would have been for him to look in the mirror and just see the former Pharisee – smug, self-righteous, once even a persecutor of Christians. But Paul *didn't* see that in the mirror. He didn't let his past define him. And why would he? Thanks to Jesus, He had been forgiven what he **“used to be.”** Through Baptism, he had been washed clean of all his guilt and shame. Now he was **“in Christ,”** and as himself wrote, **“if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away...”** Yes, now he was **“in Christ,”** so Paul didn't waste time covering up his past, or explaining it away, or pretending it wasn't so bad. What he **“used to be”** was now irrelevant. What mattered was what he could become. Paul wanted to take full advantage of the great possibilities God had in mind for him. And he did! As he said, **“Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal...”** That was Paul's attitude, and that was the attitude he encouraged in others.

Actually, we see a good example of this in our text. At first, it may not seem so encouraging, for Paul starts out reciting a long list of lifestyles that are not fitting for Christians. Then he says, **“And that is what some of you used to be.”** But make no mistake. This is not a guilt trip. Paul is not trying to shame the Corinthians. Just the opposite! **“That is what you *used* to be”** means that's not what you are any more! **“Used to be”** is past tense! And his point is: *Don't let your past define you! Don't let yourselves stay stuck with what you “used to be.”* It is all irrelevant now that the grace of God has forgiven you, now that the blood of Christ has redeemed you. Things are different now, for **“you have been washed, you have been sanctified, you have been justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”** In fact, when you think about it, these words **“used to be”** are words of grace. **“Used to be”**

means what's past is past. In God's eyes, you are now his precious, redeemed child. **"Used to be"** means you have been given a fresh, new start. In God's eyes, you are a bundle of possibilities just waiting to be developed. And oh, does He have great plans for you! God is ready to help you grow in amazing ways! God is ready, willing, and able to help you become all you are meant to be! So let that be your focus. Spiritual growth. What you can become. Not what **"used to be."** In His grace, God has moved on, and so can you and I!

Yes, that is Paul's point. God has moved on. He does not count our sins against us. God has moved on, and so can you and I. But will we move on? That is his point as well. And in a practical sense, it is an even more important point, because it goes to the very heart of why God redeemed us. Jesus did not die for our sins on the cross just to leave us stuck in what we **"used to be."** Jesus redeemed us at such great cost so that we could move on to live lives that glorify God. The grace that saves us was always meant to change and improve us, too. As Christians, we need to recognize this. We may not have to change and grow to earn our way into heaven, but God does still want us to change and grow. He saved us from sin for a new kind of life, and the way to honor all Jesus did for us is to embrace the reason for His sacrifice. Be open to inner change. Pursue spiritual growth. Live the new kind of life He saved us for. Instead of letting the past define us and what **"used to be"** shape our behavior, God invites us to let His possibilities define us and what we're becoming shape our behavior.

Again, to see what this looks like, let's go back to that story about the boy with the talent for basketball. Okay, he messed up big time throwing the ball through the wrong hoop! But suppose that, even so, his teammates reach out to him and forgive him. And on top of that, suppose his coach offers him the help he needs to move on and fulfill his potential as a player. The boy now has a choice to make, doesn't he? It might be easier to just stay stuck where he is. It might be tempting to quit the team, keep his distance, and make excuses for not trying anymore. But when he thinks how good his teammates have been, accepting him in spite of his mistake, and when he thinks how much his coach believes in him, how much his coach is willing to help him fulfill his potential – well, all that's pretty persuasive, too. His choice is whether to let his past mistake define him or focus on the great player he can become. To me, the right choice seems obvious – go for what you can become! Hopefully, the boy would choose that as well.

Now, that's not to say it will all be quick and easy. He's not going to become that great player overnight. There is going to be a lot of hard work ahead, probably more mistakes, too. And that self-image problem won't just vanish. Chances are, there will be times out on the court when all that old stuff will flash back into his brain. Not just the one-time feeling of being such a loser, such a dufus, but the fear: *"That's what I am, it's what I've always been, and it's all I'm ever going to be."* That fear could be a powerful one. So powerful that this boy might feel like quitting the team again. So again...and again, he's going to have a choice to make: Am I going to let my past define me? Or am I going to honor the

acceptance of my teammates, who have given me this second chance? Am I going to trust the word of my coach that I am capable of so much more? And am I going to depend on his help to fulfill my potential? In short, am I going to stay stuck in **“used to be”** or focus on what I can become?

That’s the kind of choice we face, too. Most likely, we’ll face it again and again. For even with God’s grace doing the real work, it is not easy to change; it is not easy to improve. And this being the case, we can expect our weak human nature to rebel. It prefers what’s easy, so it’s quite happy staying stuck in what **“used to be,”** though, of course, it still wants to enjoy assurance of salvation. So naturally, it’s going to try to have it both ways – which it can’t, but that explain a lot of the temptations that get in the way of growth. Like why it is tempting to cover up what **“used to be,”** instead of seeking God’s help to move on. Also why it’s tempting to explain away weaknesses or pretend they’re not so bad, or even defend sin, instead of repenting. There are lots of ways to stay stuck in what **“used to be.”** But if we want to honor God, we need to understand: these excuses are a waste of breath! And if we are interested in growth, they’re also a waste of time! Covering up, explaining away, pretending, even defending sin – *think* how much time that takes. And energy! For *what?* Human nature may not want to hear this, but if you consider all the time and energy that go into covering up or explaining away, it makes more sense to invest all that into making godly choices. And if you consider all the time and energy that go into pretending or defending sin, it makes more sense to invest all that in godly change and growth. And wouldn’t that be a better way to thank God for all He did to save us? You bet! In His grace, God has moved on. By His grace, we can move on, too, and we need to – need to change and grow and become all we’re meant to be.

So will we? Chances are, every one of us has some kind of **“used to be”** inside – perhaps a weakness we’ve struggled with, a mistake we’ve made, a hurt we’ve inflicted, perhaps even an un-Christian lifestyle we once embraced. Regardless, there are three reminders we want to take home with us that will help us move on. First, remember that this **“used to be”** is just a **“used to be”** and nothing more. Thanks to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, you are forgiven and cleansed. What’s past is past. So, second, do not let this **“used to be”** define you. So far as God is concerned, **“you have been washed, you have been sanctified, you have been justified...”** In God’s eyes, you are His precious child. Let *His* opinion define you. After all, whose opinion matters more than God’s? Third, remember *why* God has given you a fresh, new start – because He has put great potential within you and wants to see you become all you were meant to be! Oh, and one more thing: remember that over time God can turn even the worst stuff into something beautiful. Yes, spiritual growth does take time. The process can be hard. Things can get in the way. But what a plan God has to make your life a thing of beauty! And God so wants to do that! Amen.