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The Gospel of John
Alive in Christ
John 5:18-29

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Can people change? Is it possible? Certainly superficially, I suppose, we can change. I used to hate eating pizza, and now I love it. Just ask the high school youth group. But even though I now eat more pizza than I used to, I don't think I'm fundamentally different than I was before. No, I'm talking about real change. The kind of change where a person who knew the old you would find the new you almost unrecognizable.

Well, maybe. Our dreams change. Our aspirations change. Our priorities change as we grow older. Maybe instead of striving for personal glory, we start to focus on providing for the ones we love. Maybe instead of taking the kind of risks we once did, we find ourselves prioritizing rest and security. That kind of change is to be expected, I suppose. But that's not the kind of change I'm talking about. I'm talking about seismic change. 180 degrees change. The kind of change where you become a fundamentally different person. Where the old you is dead, and the new you is fully alive.

In this morning's text, Jesus talks about his power to bring life to the dead. He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. ²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself."

What does it mean to be fully alive? Well, to the old you, perhaps it meant pleasure. You haven't lived until you've tried so and so. You haven't lived until you've tried the latest latte from this niche coffee shop. Or you haven't lived until you've traveled the world. Maybe if you were a 90's kid like me, you'll remember how, for a few years it seemed that everything was marketed as being Xtreme. Skateboards and tape decks and sodas and probably even spiral bound notebooks. And if you wanted to live life to the fullest, you needed to live it to the Xtreme. So, I took that advice. I bought a skateboard and I tried to ride it. But it was harder than it looked, and I scraped up my knees.

So, being alive must mean something else. Maybe it means getting ahead in your career. Or maybe it means gaining the esteem of your community. Or getting more followers on Instagram, or cultivating the perfect family life. Or maybe it's doing everything right – better than everyone else. Maybe it's being super religious. Pious and righteous and pure. Like the religious authorities in the text for this morning, who sought to kill Jesus for healing on the Sabbath; forgetting the truth that sometimes, in order to properly keep the Sabbath, you actually need to break it. You see, what they didn't realize... what we ourselves don't realize, is that life is not in those things. Salvation is not in those things. In fact, life lived according to those other standards is not life at all. It's death. It's a death that swallows us up completely. Because where does that kind of life lead? The life of purity and esteem and perfection leads only ever upward

to greater and greater heights until it doesn't. Because with those greater heights come greater and greater demands and the pressure to perform and it turns out that eventually you fall back down to earth with nothing to show for it. You can feed yourself into that kind of life, but you can never satisfy all of its demands. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked."¹ You were dead. I was dead. We all were dead. Shouldn't we want to change? Shouldn't we want to live?

But it's hard to want to change, isn't it? At the very heart of ourselves, we have this vision of who we are. We know ourselves, don't we? Or at least we think we do. We think we've got it all figured out. I'm John. I'm a husband, I'm a father, I'm a brother, I'm a son. I'm a pastor. And on my good days, I'm a friend. I've got all these little parts of myself and I know who I am in each of these roles. I don't know how I'd feel about changing all that. About changing who I am in each of those relationships. What would that mean? What would that look like? I'm comfortable the way that I am. I don't want to change.

But there's another part of me that I forgot to mention. And Ms. Ginna, I'm sure, would be the first to remind me that above all those other parts of me sits a more important truth; a more important relationship; a more important identity: that I'm a child of God. But maybe I think I know what that means too. I've already got that part settled. I see the azaleas and the wisteria blooming this time of year. I watch the red birds make their daily visits. I can walk my dog after I get home from work and see the most beautiful sunset. And as I walk, I can know that there is a God. But knowing there is a God is different than knowing God. You can know that there is a God even as you plot to kill the Messiah for breaking the Sabbath. Knowing that there is a God is not the same as knowing God. Knowing God changes you. It makes you a different person. It makes you alive. C.S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, writes,

*Christ says "Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours."*²

My own will shall become yours. Be careful with that. Knowing God can really do a number on you. Knowing God can change you. It can make you a new person. We who were dead in our trespasses and sins can be made alive. But what does it mean to know God? Well, to answer that question, we need only look to Jesus. In our text for this morning, Jesus tells us what it means to know God, for no one knows God like his beloved Son. He says,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. ²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. ²¹ For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will."

¹ Ephesians 2:1-2

² C.S. Lewis – *Mere Christianity*

Now, wait a minute. Are we to understand that to know God is to be like God? Surely that just goes for Jesus. I'm not Jesus, thank God. I can't be doing the things that Jesus does. I can't give myself over to others like Jesus. I can't love and forgive and serve and heal like Jesus. I've got other things to do. I've got mountains to climb. I've got a name to make for myself.

A Lutheran pastor named Tasha Morton tells the story of beginning her life in ministry. And one of the things you have to do as an aspiring minister is, you have to be psychologically evaluated. Probably a good idea, I suppose. It's an entire day of sitting for personality inventories and assessments and an interview with a psychologist. And she was flying through these assessments when she came to a fill-in-the-blank prompt that said, "I failed" followed by a blank space. She didn't know what to put in the blank, so in her haste she wrote, I failed an organic chemistry test. At 22 years old, Rev. Morton had not experienced much failure in her life up to that point. But it didn't take long for the failures to start to pile up. She says she's been rejected by more churches than she cares to count, and those that she did serve were often full of failure. Like the time she wasted thousands of the church's dollars on a mission trip that didn't pan out. Or the many sermons that didn't land, or the classes she offered to which nobody showed up. Or the times when she should have showed compassion to a struggling parishioner, but instead led with the hammer of the law. Or the visits she put off until it was too late. Or even the church that closed down on her watch. Failure upon failure followed her throughout her ministry. What did she have to show for her work? Was she nothing but a failure? She says,

*"All of this makes it an odd relief when I'm asked to go and be with someone who is dying. Death is the ultimate failure in our society. We do all we can to avoid it, delay it, soften it, and justify it... But it comes to all of us and, as a pastor, I'm often called to walk with people (and their loved ones) as they take this test they cannot pass. When I go, I am fully aware that I'm bringing with me my own failures — all the failures listed above, as well as my impending failure — to their bedside. In other words: I bring nothing. When I come face-to-face with death, I come only with things that are not my own: Jesus' words. His promise of new life and resurrection."*³

At the bedside of a dying person, Rev. Morton realizes that she, too, is, in a way, dying. Dying to her aspirations. Dying to her vision of what success would be. But in the end, that's good news. Because you cannot be raised to new life unless you have first died. If we are united with him in a death like his, how much more so shall we be united with him in a resurrection like his. Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live."

Can we change? Can we live? Can we be like Christ? The answer our Savior gives is "Yes!" But not on our own. We're right in thinking that we can't do it. Christ has to do it for us. Christ makes you alive by giving you his own life. He gives his life for you. He gives his life to you. So that, as the apostle Paul says, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."⁴

³ [The Pastor You Got, Not the Pastor You Wanted - Mockingbird](#)

⁴ Galatians 2:20