

**Peace with God  
Romans 5:1-11  
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When Alpine skier Bode Miller won his gold medal last week, I heard a reporter say that Bode had reinvented himself since his disastrous performance in the 2006 Olympics in Turin, Italy. I hear that phrase a lot: reinvented himself.

After Tiger Wood's apology, some talking head said that Tiger needed to leave his past behind and reinvent himself. Bob Dylan received the National Medal for the Arts last week and in an article describing his achievements, the journalist wrote that Dylan had reinvented himself at least a half a dozen times in his career. And in his Oscar-nominated role in the movie Crazy Heart, actor Jeff Bridges sings, "I used to be somebody, but now I am somebody else."

Who would you become if you could truly re-invent yourself? Would you change your income bracket, your stature, your race or gender? Trade blue eyes for brown, curly hair for straight, athletic ability for musical genius?

I think the impulse to re-invent ourselves is grounded in our dissatisfaction with who we have become. Some of the most spiritual people in history have experienced this dissatisfaction. St. Augustine wrote repeatedly about a restlessness with who he had become. John of the Cross spoke eloquently about the darkness that had come upon his soul. Teresa of Avila testified of a deep discontentment with the superficiality of her life and of intense longing for internal beauty. St. Francis literally stood in the village square, ripped off his clothing, rejected his family name and took on a whole new identity because of his intense dislike of who he had become.

The difference between these saints and those who espouse the desire to re-invent themselves is that they believed that rather than refashion a new persona or image for themselves, they needed to reclaim their true self, the Imago Deo, or as Teresa put it, discover the interior mansions of the soul. Regardless of the vocabulary they used, they were all talking about reclaiming the person God formed them to be before life took its toll.

If you've ever stood by the Mississippi down in New Orleans, you know how dirty the river is. Litter, waste, run-off from all sorts of factories, pesticides and fertilizers, oil spills and all manner of filth pours into the river as it moseys it's way south. Most of us would be sickened if someone took us to the river side, dipped a glass into the brown swill and offered us a sip. If we went back up the Mississippi, however, all 2,340 miles to the glacially formed Lake Itasca in Minnesota, we'd find the headwaters of the mighty river. On the west side of Lake Itasca, we'd discover a small stream called Nicolette Creek and if we followed the winding path of that creek we would eventually come to a natural spring where the water is pure and clear and good for the soul. St. Francis, John of the Cross, St. Augustine, Teresa of Avila and countless others believed there was a way to shed all the false fronts, and layers of pretense that have had toxic affects on our lives and get back to the pure spring that God intended to be the essence of our lives.

As he looked back over his life, long after his conversion, the apostle Paul was appalled at who he once was at the mid-point of his journey. Although while he was in the midst of his deterioration, he didn't recognize the distortion of his soul, later in life, it all became clear to him. He knew he wasn't born to persecute and kill innocent

people, yet the many toxic influences of his life had left his soul violent and deeply unhappy. The book of Acts describes him as man who “breathed threats and murder.”

A profound confrontation with God opened Paul's eyes and helped him find the way back to the person God had intended for him to be. He describes the way in today's passage from Romans. He said that we find our true self through an ever deepening relationship with God.

Now I'm sure that comes as no surprise to you. We all know the Bible teaches that we find spiritual completeness through communion with God. The mystery is, since we know that, why do we go to such an extent to avoid this deeper communion. We sort of know what needs to be done: Prayer, worship, meditation, obedience, service, confession, seeking the filling of the Holy Spirit. So why don't we practice these life-giving spiritual disciplines?

Paul said our obstinance is rooted in a lack of trust. Maybe we doubt that God is even there at all or doubt that God would respond to our requests for spiritual nurture. Possibly we believe that God is angry with us for some past mistakes and fear getting too close to the Holy One. Alternately, we might be angry with God for some injustice we feel God allowed to happen to us.

The apostle said the antidote to this distrust is the love of God. God's love, Paul taught, was proven to us in the death of Jesus. For God sent Jesus to this earth to communicate pure love. In response, humanity rejected Jesus, tortured him and nailed him to a cross. Even in the face of such rejection, however, Jesus did not withhold his love. Instead Christ continued to express the love of God for those who were killing him, shouting down from the cross, “Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing.”

For all sorts of reasons, Paul said, we have tended to run from God. Instead of putting ourselves under the influence of God's spirit, we have turned to all sorts of other seductions and powers to find life. They have acted upon us like the factories and farms and waste management plants have acted upon the Mississippi river. God has grieved over what has become of us and throughout history used many voices to call us back to a saving relationship with our Creator. We did not respond to those efforts and so God took the ultimate step of love and sent Jesus to show us, beyond any doubt, that our Redeemer wants to give us back the life we were created to know.

To find that pure spring of life, we have to stop running from God, trust his love and put ourselves back under the influence of God's powerful and loving spirit. As we do, we shall find a deep peace with God and a relationship that will transform us into the person God created us to be.

Paul has a term for this transformation process. He calls it justification. Think of your word processing program. You type a page and the margins are all over the place, hanging out here, running in there, choppy and unbalanced and a general mess. Then you go to the top of the page and punch justify margins and miraculously the margins are restored to a perfect pattern.

Working off another model entirely, Paul said, once we truly trust God's love for us, we quit running. We repent of our sins, let go of the behaviors that are killing us and center our lives in communion with the lover of our souls. When that happens, the power of God justifies us, restores us to who we were created to be. We find peace, wholeness, the true self, the image of God, the mansions of our soul.

In response to this act of justification, we become filled with love for God in return. Paul said, “once I found peace with God, God poured love into my heart through the Holy spirit.” The Message says we can't find enough containers to hold all the love God pours into our lives. Once this love filled his heart, Paul entered into a holy love

affair with God, in the purest form of that phrase. After a lifetime of seeking other avenues to find peace, Paul discovered spiritual relief through trusting the love of God and responding to that love with a love of his own.

As I was reviewing Evelyn Mellinger's life for her memorial service last week, I discovered this same kind of love in her soul. When I first met Evelyn she lived with her older sister Dorothy. The first Christmas I was here, Evelyn called and invited me to come for a Christmas tea with she and Dorothy. I arrived at the appointed hour and took my place around their coffee table. The two women sang a hymn and openly wept as they spoke of all God had done for them. I lit a candle, we shared some Christmas cake, drank some egg nog, joined hands, prayed and I went home.

The next December, I received another invitation for Christmas tea. I attended and each part of the ritual was repeated. I was deeply impressed by the great contentment of the two women. They didn't have much materially. They never went anywhere but the grocery store and the beauty parlor. They had no living children, grandchildren or spouses. Yet they seemed to be accompanied by someone that gave them deep peace. Every year for ten years, Dorothy and Evelyn and I shared in our Christmas gathering. I eventually realized who their companion was for it was never simply the three of us in that house, the Spirit of Christ always abided there.

Then, one afternoon in 2001, Evelyn called to say that Dorothy had passed away and I worried about how she would fare alone. Sure enough, the next Christmas, I received my invitation, but now it was just the three of us: Evelyn, Jesus and I. For another eight years, we never missed a Christmas. Although I became increasingly uneasy with Evelyn living by herself, I never thought of her as being alone. For every tea gave Evelyn opportunity to speak of her loving conversations with Christ. Her feelings for her true companion were romantic in nature, in the mystical sense of that phrase. She anticipated the day of her death like a bride anticipates her wedding for she knew she would finally get to see the one who had poured such love into her heart.

She demonstrated the sincerity of this belief, years before her own death on the day of her sister's funeral. When Evelyn called me about Dorothy's death, she said "Pastor, Dorothy believed that she was the bride of Christ, for, as you certainly know, the Bible teaches that the church is the bride of Christ."

"Yes Evelyn" I replied, "I know that is true."

"Well Pastor, since Dorothy believed she was the bride of Jesus, she asked to be buried in a wedding gown."

"Does she have one?" I innocently inquired.

"No. Pastor, would you take me to the bridal shop to pick one out?"

Now I wasn't going to do that, because I deplore awkward situations and I knew how this one was going to unfold. We would walk into the bridal shop and ask to see some gowns. The clerk would say to Evelyn, "are you getting married?" and Evelyn would answer, "no it is for my sister." "Oh," the clerk would no doubt continue, "Why doesn't your sister come in?" "Because she's dead" would have been the only truthful answer.

Knowing that I was not going to do what Evelyn requested, I did what all pastors do when they face a task they desperately want to avoid. I called on a deacon and asked her to take Evelyn to the bridal shop and she did.

On the day of the funeral, some people gathered to pay their respects to Dorothy and some folks frankly showed up to see the wedding gown. When I arrived, I braced myself for the sight and saw that the casket was closed. I assumed Evelyn would be very disappointed at this turn of events so I went to her and asked, "Evelyn, do you want me to ask the funeral director to open the casket?"

"Why pastor?" she replied with genuine puzzlement.

"Well," I said "you went to all that trouble to select a wedding gown and now no one can see it." "But Pastor," Evelyn profoundly replied, "she's not wearing it for them."

And she wasn't. The apostle Paul said there is only one way to get back to the pristine beauty of who we were created to be. We have to trust God's love enough, to turn away from all those other seductions and powers that have so distorted who God made us to be and fall in love with the Redeemer of our soul. When we wear this life for Jesus, we'll have no need to re-invent ourselves for the beauty of our created soul shall shine forth with contentment, joy and true peace.