



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

TRANSFORMATION

Sermon for August 21, 2011

Scripture: Romans 12:1-8; Matthew

Jesus asks Peter, “Who do they say that I am?” The answer equated Jesus with other religious leaders: John, Elijah, Jeremiah. Then the big question from Jesus to Simon Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” Simon responded by calling Jesus the Messiah, the long awaited savior of the Jewish people. In return Jesus then blesses Simon and tells him who he really is. In fact he changes his name from Simon to Peter, which means the rock, and he would be the rock upon which Jesus would build the church. Transformation in deed! From a rough fisherman to the head of the Church with name change and all. Impressive!

Has anything like this ever happened to you? In our more liberal style of Christianity, I don’t hear many of you talking about having been transformed. On the other hand, I as your pastor talk quite a bit about transformation in sermons and newsletter articles. Let’s spend some time on this topic today.

In Romans Paul starts off with a directive for us: Do not be conformed to the world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.... I like the translation in The Message by Eugene Peterson; listen as I read the first few verses under his heading of Place Your Life Before God: “So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out.”



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As children growing up, I bet your best known example of transformation was equated with the caterpillar becoming a butterfly, the scientific name for that being metamorphosis—in fact the Greek word is metamorphoo which literally means to change into another form. I wonder how many caterpillars and how many butterflies we have here this morning.

In an excellent book by Martin Luther King, Jr. called *Strength to Love*, there is a sermon on Romans 12 called “Transformed Nonconformity”. King acknowledges how strongly the culture around us tries to influence or even pressure us to be like them. Just think of all those TV and magazine/internet commercials. We are strongly encouraged to spend a lot of time and money on improving our looks, acquiring the latest technology, driving a fancy car, buying the biggest house we can or cannot afford. King paraphrases Paul with words we have heard before—“We must find a way to live in the world but not of the world.” He adds that we must make history and not be shaped by history. I especially like this quote of King, “Most people are thermometers that record or register the temperature of majority opinion, not thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society.’ We all know serious examples of how the church went along with society rather than following Jesus teachings: slavery, the Holocaust, the equality of women, segregation just to name a few. To quote King again, “There are some things in our world to which men of goodwill must be maladjusted. I confess that I never intend to become adjusted to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination, to the moral degeneracy of religious bigotry and the corroding effects of narrow sectarianism, to economic conditions that deprive men of work and food, and to the insanities of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence.”



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This past week I had the privilege of watching a DVD of a sermon by the former Riverside Church senior pastor, Rev. James Forbes. He was preaching while the debt crisis debates were going on in Congress. He pointed out that a budget is a moral and spiritual document. Because of budgetary decisions, he says, “some will eat and some will starve; some will have health care, and others will be without. Some will have housing, education, and jobs, while others will suffer from the lack thereof.” He suggests that decision makers carefully reflect on their budgetary decisions and think of whom the budget will bless and whom it will curse. He reminds his listeners, that whatever one’s political persuasion, we all need to consider making sacrifices and compromises that will be for the common good of all Americans.

So what is the goal of transformation? Presenting ourselves to God in a way that we are open to the Spirit to guide us or as Paul says, “by the mercies of God”, to focus one’s attention on God and we will be changed from the inside out. Notice that in Romans Paul speaks of this transformation in a passive way—it is something that we allow to be done to us, not something that we do by our power alone. I believe the goal of transformation is very simply to become more like Christ and to feel more passion about our faith.

I believe that we are not transformed once and for all. My experience both personally and with other people shows many different transformations in a lifetime. These metamorphoses may be insight that changes our way of thinking; for example, I remember one Sunday when I was preaching on my belief that although Jesus is my gate to God, there are other gates for other people/other faiths that are just as valid for them as Jesus is for us. One of the congregation who came from a much more conservative Christianity came to me at the end with tears in her eyes



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saying that she finally got it! Now I see that as transformation. What changes came about because of that, I do not know but my guess is that she saw people of other faiths differently and treated them with more love and less “the Other”.

Paul says that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we can discern what is the will of God for our lives. He adds that we need to discern what is good and acceptable and perfect (perfect means whole—not that we never make a mistake). How do we renew our minds? You may have other answers but in my opinion it’s a process of setting our minds on things of the Spirit; for example, spending time in religious reading, attending classes for adults here at church, as well as engaging in spiritual practices such as prayer, hospitality, or serving those in need. Psychological research points towards how we can change attitudes and behaviors by filling our minds with positive images and words. Some days I spend altogether too much time on material things, especially the stock market. On those days I do not feel the usual joy, even when the market is up. So much for renewing our minds and back to transformation.

It’s possible for some people to become transformed suddenly; however, for most of us it is a gradual process. I’m thinking back on my “born again by mistake” experience when I was around 10 years old. As most of you have heard before, I went to hear an evangelist with some adult friends of my family. The Congregational Church of my childhood did not have altar calls. At the end of the Evangelist’s preaching he asked for all those who loved Jesus to come forward, keeping eyes closed. Now there may have been several other explanations and directions in his preaching that I didn’t get, being as young as I was. But anyway I kept my eyes closed and moved into the aisle where someone led me to the front of the service. After a prayer I was given a Gospel of John and told that I had made a



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very important decision. Now this certainly was not a sudden transformation. I didn't even know what I was doing; however, this event led to my reading the Bible from cover to cover and after many, many years of answering other faith-filled calls, finally in my 60's becoming ordained to ministry. That's what I would call a gradual transformation. There continue to be times when I feel the Spirit so strongly and I passionately feel more transformation. One of the most recent times that happened to me was Easter sunrise service. For any of you that were there, you may have noticed something different in my preaching. In some mysterious way when I was reading the Gospel I passionately resonated with Mary Magdalene's statement, "I have seen my Lord" and went into a serious experiential reviewing of how I and members of this congregation had also seen the Lord. So with these couple of examples, I hope you can relate more when I'm referring to transformation.

My dear church family I wish I had more answers about transformation, about God, about prayer, about eternal life. I wish I could answer all of your questions without a shadow of a doubt. Lots of the time I feel like a caterpillar; however, there are other times when I know God has given me wings and I am truly a butterfly, transformed, called by name to be God's love in this world. Thank you for letting me share this life with you. I would love to know more about your transformations or your concern about being too much of a caterpillar. Don't hesitate to contact me. Praise be to God. Amen!