

12th Sunday After Pentecost, yr. a, 8/23/2020
Isaiah 51: 1-16; Romans 12: 1-8; Matthew 16: 13-20
Not Conformed, But Transformed – Rev Dr. Deborah M. Jenks

We hear the Apostle Paul say to the church in Rome: “I appeal to you ... brothers and sisters by the mercies of God, present your bodies (your selves) as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed ... For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourselves more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment ... For as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we who are many, are one body in Christ ...” (Rom. 12:1-4)

What does it take to be transformed, and not conformed to the world? From the time we become aware of ourselves and our behavior in relationship to others, especially those whom we love and who love us, we know in a place deep in our hearts – a place so deep we can at times, for long periods of time, ignore what we deep down know – that we are not perfect. That we are not quite as good, or as kind, or as merciful and gracious as we know we are meant to be. Yet at the same time, we know deep down that we are being drawn by God’s steadfast love toward becoming whole ... toward a transformation, toward knowing ourselves and all others as Beloved by God ... toward knowing in our hearts that we and all, though many, are one in God.

So how do we not be conformed to this world – pressed into a pattern of values in a world that divides people ... that seems to push us into enclaves and compels us to measure and judge ourselves in relation to others, to interpret and measure everything by the standards of what we think we know, what we believe is right, or accurate, or truth? How can we be transformed into the wholeness that makes us one body in Christ and individually members one of another? Do we even think its possible, or desirable?

I think the answer is more revealed than explained. In the Gospel reading from Matthew we hear Jesus asking his disciples; “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And after they reply, “Well some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.” Then Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” ... I’ve long been fascinated by how we human beings move from taking another person’s word for something to knowing or believing it for ourselves. How do we get from taking someone else’s word that something is true to knowing it to be true deep in our heart of hearts? How did Peter make the leap from what other people were saying about Jesus to being able to say from his heart, “You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”?

Jesus says to Peter and the other disciples, “God bless you Simon, son of Jonah! You did not get that answer out of books or from teachers, or from what others are saying. God himself let you in on this truth of who I really am.” In

other words, it was revelation. Somehow in some way Peter saw Jesus in a new, deeper, more intimate way. Saw Jesus wholly, for who Jesus really is.

This revelation can feel something like walking in the dark woods for awhile, and coming out of the trees suddenly, unexpectedly seeing the whole landscape spread out before you in the shining sun. Or like when you find yourself seeing someone – your child, your parent, your lover, your friend – someone you believe you know as well as you can know anybody and it's as if you're seeing them for the first time, as if they are a complete mystery to you. The problem with these revelations – these moments of transformation of our awareness of who we are, the heart of God and the hearts of others – is that they don't seem to stay with us for very long. We forget them. Forget their power, their impact. We slip into roles and habits, thoughts that are familiar, comforting and comfortable to us. We can begin to take for granted what at one point seemed such a great and amazing awesome gift. We see one another and the world around us with our old eyes, not our new eyes – eyes which in revelation reflect what God sees.

It's so easy for our vision to become clouded by what is comfortable, familiar, by what we already think we know. Right after Peter's blessed revelation about who Jesus is, Jesus begins to show the disciples what must happen next. How he has to go to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of the political and religious leaders and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And it is Peter

– Peter who just a while ago confessed Jesus as Son of the Living God – who takes Jesus aside and says, “God forbid it Lord! This must never happen to you!” And Jesus turns to him, to the one who is to be the rock on which the church is built, and says, “Get behind me Satan!”

How often do we find ourselves caught up in roles, assumptions, expectations, our own convictions about things, stuck with the labels or images we have of others and others have of us? These roles, assumptions, expectations can be expressed in nicknames, in pictures parents form of their children which we as their children never seem to outgrow, or the pictures we have of our parents which they can never escape. Or the ways we have of understanding and explaining our own behavior or the behavior of others. We sense ... we know these labels, these pictures, these expectations and assumptions are incomplete and imperfect. We know they barely scratch the surface of who we really are in God's eyes as children beloved by God. Yet they get in the way, blind us to seeing the whole, beautiful, God-given truth in the depths of our being.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

How do we choose not to be conformed but transformed in such a way that transformation – the revelations we receive, the grace we experience - does not slip away, is not lost sight of? In what way can we choose to act or respond in relationship with others and this world that God creates in such a way as to be open-hearted to the grace of God that comes as revelation and not fall back into the default comfort of what we already know (or think we know)?

Congressman John Lewis, the late civil rights icon, in an interview with Krista Tippett of “On Being” said, “I wanted to believe, and I did believe, that things would get better. Later I discovered that you have to have this sense of faith that what you’re moving toward is already done, its already happened. And you live as if you’re already there, that you’re already in that (beloved) community ...” (Tippett, p. 111)

How do we choose not to be conformed but transformed? The way we answer the question is to live “as if”. To continually to open our hearts and our lives, our relationships and the choices we are called upon to make to God’s loving revelation and direction and not being conformed, but transformed as Paul says in Romans. The answer to the question is not something we can give once and then be done with it. Who do you say Jesus is? It is a question we have to live day in and day out as we open our hearts to God’s wondrous love; as we seek to faithfully love God with all our heart, minds, souls, and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Living in this open-hearted relationship is how we move from taking other people's word for it, to knowing and believing and living in God's way for ourselves. It means always being open to God working in and through us – open to more revelation. God isn't finished with us, with others, with this world yet. To live with hearts open to God's love and our relationship with God is what Paul means by his words in Romans 12... by the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God ... Do not be conformed to this world (don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking). But be transformed – be changed from the inside out, so that you might see what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Recently I revisited a book, Leadership on the Line, I read some time ago written by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky who taught at Harvard Business School. They tell a story which was for me a moment of revelation – much like Peter's revelation on the road to Caesarea Philippi.

Ron Heifetz was invited to give a talk on leadership in Oxford, England on a weekend, which coincided with the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. Ron and his wife Sousan wondered where they would celebrate the holy day so far from any Jewish community. Just before sundown, which marked the start of the New Year, they discovered a 600 year old Anglican Church in the village. They wandered in and Ron sat down in front, a Jew in an Anglican church, facing Jesus on the cross. He looked up at the image of a man being tortured for his

beliefs. After decades of feeling a smoldering outrage with the violent abuses of Christianity and its persecutions, Ron found sitting in that church a very challenging leap across a deep divide. As he reflected on his complex feelings, he began to wonder what this holiday might have been like for Jesus in his lifetime. He thought, "You were one of our teachers. Why not keep each other company on the New Year? Nobody else is here to celebrate with us."

Ron stared at Jesus ... "Reb Jesus, (Reb is an endearing form of the word Rabbi, which means teacher) "Reb Jesus, will you tell me your experience on the cross? This is Rosh Hashanah, when we contemplate Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Will you please give me a message?" After about 10 minutes, Ron got very excited and asked his wife to come with him; taking her by the hand he led her outside into the late afternoon sun, and asked her to sit by him near the trunk of an enormous old pine tree. ...

Together they lay there outstretched, both of them looking up into the high branches of the tree. "How do you feel?" he asked. "Really vulnerable," she answered. "Me too. And that's it! That's the message – the willingness to feel everything, everything, to hold it all without letting go of your work. To feel, as Reb Jesus felt, the gravest doubt, forsaken and betrayed near his moment of death. To cry out like King David in the wilderness, just when you desperately want to believe that you're doing the right thing, that your sacrifice means something, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' But in nearly the

same instant, to feel compassion, 'Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.' Jesus remained open." (Heifetz & Linsky, p. 227)

Who do we say Jesus is? He is the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of the living God. Amen.

Sources Cited:

Heifetz, Ronald A. & Linsky, Marty, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*. Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

Tippett, Krista, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*. Penguin Books, 2016.