

Transformation and the Spirit

II Corinthians 3:4-6, 17-18

Let's talk about the Spirit and transformation today and how the Spirit is transforming us day by day—and what it might look like. A little hint: it will look like freedom and it will look like love.

It's a good way to spend a Pentecost Sunday as we remember that day 50 days after Easter when the Spirit blew through the house in Jerusalem where the apostles were gathered, and tongues as of fire rested on their heads, then moved into the street when Jews from many nations and tongues had gathered for the Jewish Feast of Pentecost.

And when it happened people could hear and understand each other even though they spoke different languages. That's one mark of the Spirit: it helps us to be *willing* and *able* to hear and understand one another, no small gift of the Spirit.

From the book of Genesis on we've see the Spirit at work. At the beginning of all things the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the formless deep and God's creation of the world began.

The Spirit seized the Hebrew prophets to speak truth to God's people and their leaders. The prophet Amos was feeding his flock when, as he put it, the Spirit kidnapped him from behind his flock.

We've talked here about the Celtic symbol of the Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose, no gentle dove, who leads us out to where we most need to go and where God most needs for us to go.

But today I want to talk about the work of the Spirit in us and in the church for transformation.

I

Let's look at Paul's words in his Second Letter to the Corinthians. "The letter kills but the Spirit brings life." He was talking about how living by the letter of his Jewish law was killing him—and making him a killer. "The letter kills", he said, calling it, "the ministry of death chiseled in letters on stone tablets." But the Spirit had brought him life, and brings us life.

Through the centuries the church has had a lover's quarrel with the Spirit. It is manifest in the tension between spirit and form, spirit and tradition, spirit and rules, between the church of yesteryear and the church God through the Spirit is calling us to be today.

There have been renewal movements throughout our history that have been led by the Holy Spirit. Like John Wesley's renewal movement in England that took God's love into the streets, even serving the eucharist in the streets.

The Pentecostal movement in America began with the Azuza Street Revival in Los Angeles in 1906. As the revival went on, the Spirit brought together people of all races and classes. Women were empowered to lead and preach. That sounds like the Spirit, doesn't it? As the Old Testament prophet Joel prophesied, "And I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. And the young shall see visions and the old will dream dreams!" Something new is happening, and it is bringing life.

The letter kills but the Spirit brings life. Biblical literalism, for example, works against the Spirit because it forces a certain way of reading scripture on everybody. Sometimes we are tempted to live by the letter, but God has something better in mind—living by the Spirit.

The Spirit brings freedom! Someone has said that when we become Christians, what we should feel is "The chains have fallen off!" Not, "I better not screw up!"

What God has in mind is nothing less than transformation. This is how Paul describes it:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit is there is freedom.

Did you hear that word, “freedom”?

And we all with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord *are being changed* into his likeness from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord who is Spirit.

Is this transformation possible? Have we given up on it as a possibility—or never heard of it?

I’ll tell you a secret. I’m going to let it out today. One whole branch of Christianity, encompassing millions of Christians, is built around the promise of transformation. I’m talking about Eastern Orthodox Christianity. One of their most holy feast days is the Feast of Transfiguration, based on Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain in Matthew 17. It is sometimes called the *Feast of Metamorphosis!*

For them, the center of the Christian life is the Christian’s transformation into Christ’s likeness. Not being saved, or getting into heaven or escaping hell, but being *changed*, changed into little Christs. Their Greek word for it is *Theosis*. And a key scripture passage is from II Peter:

His divine power has given us everything we needed for life and godliness...that we might participate in the divine nature.

Participating in the divine nature! It boggles one's mind! We're not always ready for change, especially that big. St. Augustine famously prayed, "God make me chaste—but not yet!" We might pray: "Lord, change me and my church, but not yet!"

A fourth century theologian, Athanasius, captured the striking sense of it by saying, "God became human that we might become divine."

We might shy away from such language for good reason, for people associate God-likeness with power, often coercive power. It smacks of grandiosity and narcissism.

But that's far from the transformation Jesus had in mind, he who relinquished power and lived to serve. It is about becoming who you most deeply are as one created in the divine image.

We are being transformed as we begin to strip away the layers of the false self, that self which is shaped by the world, and discover our true self which partakes of the divine nature. Is that too much to take in?

Paul said that when the Spirit takes hold of us, what comes into our lives are things like

Love

Joy

Peace

Patience

Kindness

Goodness

Gentleness

Faithfulness and

Self-control.

How would you like a little more

Love

Joy

Peace

Patience

Kindness

Goodness

Faithfulness

Gentleness

And even Self-control?

That's the kind of transformation God has in mind for us. And if you think you're not adequate for that, Paul adds, "This it comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

And it doesn't happen all at once, we are *becoming* more like the one we follow. Degree by degree, Paul says.

We may not always see it; others may see it better in us. But there are days we can say with the black preacher:

I'm not what I want to be;

I'm not what I'm going to be;

But thank God, I'm not what I used to be!

III

What Paul is saying is that *we become what we behold*. Beholding Christ is what leads to transformation.

We behold the Christ when we come to church and hear his teachings. We behold the Christ when we keep him in mind as we go through the week. We

behold the Christ in other people. We behold the beauty of the Lord in the beauty of God's work. As the poet Hopkins wrote: "Christ plays in ten thousand places."

Annie Dillard, one of my favorite writers, writes:

How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.

What God offers us in the Spirit is the opportunity to choose *rules* or *Spirit*.

Those rules which come not from God, but more from the culture around us or from churches more rule-based than love-based. It's the difference between the law of rules and the law of love. As Paul put it: "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." The law of Christ is the law of love. How would you like to be that free? To let love, not conformity to other's expectations, guide your life?

It all begins in our own desiring and yearning. That's where we start, and God honors our desiring and yearning for transformation, even if we are not close to it today.

We can begin today, or begin *again* today, if that's what we want.