

TRANSFORMED BY GRACE

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Mark 4: 26-34 & 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 & 16-17

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So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being. 2 Corinthians 5:16-17

The U.S. standard railroad gauge (distance between rails) is four feet, eight-and-one-half inches.

Why such an odd number? Because that's the way they built them in England, and American railroads were built by British engineers who came here to live and work.

But why did the English adopt that particular gauge? Because the people who built the pre-railroad tramways used that gauge.

The people who built tramways used that gauge because they used the same standards and tools they had used for building wagons, which were set on a gauge of four feet, eight-and-one-half inches.

"But why," you may ask, "were wagons built to that scale?" Because the wheels had to be that wide apart to match the wheel ruts in the roads.

"So, who built these old rutted roads?"

"Well, those first long-distance roads were built by the Romans for their army. The roads have been in use ever since and ruts were first made by Roman war chariots. Four feet, eight-and-one-half inches was the width a chariot needed to be to accommodate the rear ends of two war horses."

Maybe "that's the way it's always been" isn't really as great of an excuse as some people believe it is

Speaking of railroads...

When the railroads were first introduced to the U.S., some folks feared that they'd be the downfall of the nation! Here's an excerpt from a letter to then President Andrew Jackson dated January 31, 1829:

As you may know, Mr. President, 'railroad' carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of 15 miles per hour by 'engines' which, in addition to endangering life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the countryside, setting fire to crops, scaring the livestock and frightening women and children. The Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed.

Martin Van Buren Governor of New York

As you might have guessed, this morning's lectionary readings have brought us to the topic of change or, more correctly, transformation.

NEW THINGS HAVE COME INTO BEING

In the reading from the 5th chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle rambles on for a while, talking about the kind of transformation that takes place in us when we are struck by grace through Jesus Christ.

The metaphor which he uses to describe this transformation however, creates nearly as much confusion, at least it does for me, as it clears up. We used to walk "in the body" but now that Jesus Christ has come into our lives, we walk in the spirit.

We are transformed human beings. We used to relate to people from "a human point of view" but now we relate to them or "regard" them, in his words, from a spiritual point of view. God's grace transforms us by transforming how we relate to each other.

It's like we used to be always walking through a dark room but now someone has turned on the lights. The room hasn't changed. It's still the same messy room it was before. Look, there's the Lego lying on the carpet waiting for me to step on it. And there's the ottoman out in the middle of the room, waiting to trip me instead of pushed up against the chair where it's supposed to be. And there's my magazine spread out on my chair where I might have sat on it in the dark.

But now, I can see things not as I imagine them to be, but as they are. I don't have to go stumbling around, stepping on the Lego and tripping over the ottoman or the dog and sitting on the very magazine I want to read. Before the light came on, I related to the room as one who walks in darkness. Now that the light is on, however, both the room and I are transformed. I can walk as one who sees clearly.

Before I was struck by God's grace, I related to other people as ones who walked in darkness. But now, grace has been given to me as a gift from God as he comes to us in Jesus Christ and I am transformed. Now I can relate to those people as ones who walk in the light of grace. I can see them not as I imagine them to be but as the really are. I can see their hurt and their pain. I can see their loves and their worries. I can see them as children of God, and subject to his grace if only they will accept it.

I am transformed by grace and, as I am transformed, they are transformed as well.

"So, if anyone is in Christ," says Paul, "there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!"

THEY WORK BECAUSE THEY WORK

The gospel writer, Mark, chooses a simpler and clearer metaphor, to show how God's grace works, that of seeds.

In the first parable of this morning's text, he illustrates how the way transformative grace works is a mystery. Like a seed, it works because it works. The farmer plants the seeds, goes home, goes to bed, gets up, goes back to work and, in a few days, the seed is transformed into a seedling or sprout which is, in turn, transformed into a plant which is, in turn transformed into fruit and then, back into a seed.

We'd be fools to say, "Well, I can't possibly eat this tomato until I fully understand all of the how's and why's of its growth and maturation. I can't benefit from it until I know all the ins and outs of photosynthesis.

No, all we have to know to benefit from the plant is that it works.

And, according to Mark, God's grace is like that. We don't have to understand it to benefit from it. We need only accept it.

And how do we do that?

Why, by faith. We accept that God's grace can transform us and change us.

Well, that's a pretty tall order. I don't know if I have that much faith.

Oh, says Mark, you don't need much. Just a tiny little bit, about the size of a mustard seed.

And, you say, that if I have enough faith to accept God's grace, then it will transform me?

That's right.

Well, I've never been much of one for change, you know. I'm kinda like that Samuel Hoffenstein guy, "Come weal, come woe, my status is quo."

And there it is. God's loving, forgiving, accepting grace comes flying at us and we duck and cover because we know, deep down inside, that it's going to transform us and transformation sounds just a little too much like change.

COOL, COOL CONSIDERATE MEN

One of my favorite Broadway musicals is "1776" which tells the story of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. And one of my favorite songs from that musical is "Cool, Cool Considerate Men" which, itself, has a story that goes with it.

The song comes in the middle of the play when the arguments and discussion about whether or not to adopt the Declaration have bogged down to a crawl and may not begin to move again. In one scene the wealthy, conservative, Loyalists who do not want to become an independent country, have come together to congratulate each other on having stopped the movement toward independence in its tracks.

They sing and dance a little minuet called “Cool, Cool Considerate Men” about how being cautious and conservative is always the wisest course and how they are to be congratulated for forcing the Continental Congress into a position of doing nothing.

Come ye cool, cool considerate set
 We'll dance together to the same minuet
 To the right, ever to the right
 Never to the left, forever to the right
 May our creed be never to exceed
 Regulated speed, no matter what the need

What we do we do rationally
 We never ever go off half-cocked, not we
 Why begin till we know that we can win
 And if we cannot win why bother to begin?

We say this game's not of our choosing
 Why should we risk losing?
 We grasp and hold to tradition that is old: a reluctance to be bold.

Come ye cool, cool considerate men
 The likes of which may never be seen again
 With our land, cash in hand
 Self-command, future planned
 And we'll hold on to our gold
 Tradition that is old, reluctant to be bold.
 We say this game's not of our choosing
 Why should we risk losing?

The piece uses humor to show that they are afraid of change and their fear runs so deep that they have locked the Continental Congress into inaction. They will forego freedom and accept tyranny rather than entertain the thought of changing. They sing and they prance back and forth, dancing as they sing, bowing to each other and the audience laughs uproariously.

Interestingly, however, that song does not appear in the movie.

Peter Hunt, the director, finished the final post production work on the film and went on vacation in Europe. While he was gone, the producer, Jack Warner was so proud of the movie that he decided to invite his good friend, President Richard Nixon, over to see a copy of it at his home.

Nixon did not like it, however. He especially didn't like that one song which he said made fun of conservative people and he said that if it was left in, he would warn conservatives not to see the movie as it was unamerican, it was liberal, and it made them a laughing stock.

So, producer Jack Warner, intimidated and threatened by the president, had the song removed from the film in 1972 just before it was released to the theaters. When the director,

Peter Hunt returned from his vacation he found out what had happened and was furious. The song was satire. Since when do artists let politicians tell them what they can and cannot display?

But, so he wouldn't be second guessed again, Jack Warner had all copies of the song destroyed. Or, he thought he did. In 2014 one editor of the film came to Peter Hunt with a copy he had saved and hidden for posterity. In 2015, the 40th anniversary version of the film was released with the song "Cool, Cool Considerate Men," restored to its original place.

And so, it goes. We are sometimes, indeed, often so afraid of change that we will turn our back on God's grace, refuse to accept freedom, embrace tyranny, and engage in political censorship because doing so makes a vague promise of security, a promise that is usually quickly broken if it was ever meant to be kept in the first place.

AFRAID OF TRANSFORMATION, AFRAID TO CHANGE

The week of June 6 you couldn't turn on the television during the news hour without seeing another tribute to the GI's who participated in the D Day invasion to liberate France from the Nazis.

In one poignant scene a high school girl was interviewing a D Day veteran who was on the beach that day and one of the questions she asked him was, "Were you scared?"

I don't remember his exact words because I was so moved by the thrust of his answer. So please pardon me if I paraphrase his response. He said something like this:

"I didn't have time to be scared, honey. See, being scared would have meant that I was thinking about myself and I had been trained to do that. No, I was thinking about the fella on my left and the fella on my right. They were counting on me. We were all counting on each other. I knew I had to do my job and they had to do theirs or we'd all be lost on that beach."

See, that's how we overcome our fear. We think about others more than we think about ourselves.

My students in theater and public speaking used to ask me how to overcome stage fright. I told them, the only way to do that was to care more about your subject and your audience than you care about yourself.

I'll close with one more brief story. I know you all know who Paul Harvey was, don't you? (I've asked that question of people under 50 and all I hear is crickets.) Well, anyway, he used to tell this story about the courage that it takes to overcome fear.

One summer morning as Ray Blankenship was preparing his breakfast, he gazed out the window, and saw a small girl being swept along in the rain-flooded drainage ditch beside his Andover, Ohio, home. Blankenship knew that farther downstream, the ditch disappeared with a roar underneath a road and then emptied into the main culvert. Ray dashed out the door and raced along the ditch, to get ahead of the foundering child. Then he hurled himself into

the deep, churning water. He surfaced and was able to grab the child's arm. They tumbled end over end. Within about three feet of the yawning culvert, Ray's free hand felt something-- possibly a rock-- protruding from one bank. He clung desperately, but the tremendous force of the water tried to tear him and the child away. He said, he thought "I just have to hang on until help comes." He did better than that. By the time fire-department rescuers arrived, Blankenship had somehow managed to pull himself and the girl to safety. Both were treated for hypothermia and shock. A month later, on April 12, 1989, Ray Blankenship was awarded the Coast Guard's Silver Lifesaving Medal. The award was fitting, for this selfless person was at even greater risk to himself than most people knew. Ray Blankenship didn't know how to swim.

The only sure way to receive and accept God's grace and all that comes with it is to overcome our fear of change. And the only way to overcome our fear is to care about someone else more than we care about ourselves.

Thus, saith the Lord.

Amen