



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"Transformation, not transaction" - The Final Sunday after Pentecost - 11/22/2020

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

Over the past couple of weeks I've been experiencing this profound kind of epiphany that has been contained in two different thoughts that captured my attention and kind of drew my prayer life out and got me thinking about things differently from an entirely different perspective. The first was I remembered a kind of saying that I had forgotten so much that it became radical when I remembered it again. And that is something that is said about the Bible, which is that the Bible does not seek to make itself relevant to our world. And our attempts to somehow make the Bible relevant to our own space and time, usually ends up somehow constraining or reducing the power of the word of God. But rather, the Bible invites us to enter its world, to see our lives, to see our world, to see our community, to see our nation in the light of the scriptures.

So the first epiphany that I had was that remembrance, the Bible does not seek to make itself relevant to us. Rather, the Bible invites us to come into its world and find ourselves by its lights. And the second epiphany that I experienced was more particular to all of what we have read in the Gospel of Matthew over the past few weeks. I suddenly realized what Matthew was about, a kind of lens through which I now understand the driving force of this incredible gospel. And that is that Matthew wants to invite us to give up a transactional religion and take on a religion of transformation, to give up a transactional religion.

So often we can make our life with God into something that we can somehow work out like a deal. And so we work the sacramental machinery of the church and we get ourselves baptized and confirmed. Or if we go on to do other things, to be married or ordained, or finally buried - all of these transactions work the sacramental machinery of the church, or sometimes, and more often, it seems in these days that we're living in, people will try to live a good life and they'll hope and pray that somehow that good life measures up. That when God grants eternal life to us, He looks upon this good life that we've led, the fact that we've been faithful to our spouses or successful in our careers, or loving to our children, or kind to animals, and say, this person's worthy of being in heaven, of being brought into eternal life.

Now, those are things we see and probably it's incredibly natural and human for us to have that part of ourselves that wants to somehow create a kind of transaction, because what happens in transactions is you retain the power, you

retain the kind of agency. It's up to you and you stay in control. But I don't think the life of faith is about that. And I don't think the Gospel of Matthew is about that. What Matthew wants us to see is that we have been invited through Jesus Christ to experience transformation. And in transformation, we go through a kind of deep, fundamental change of being.

And the word that is used for that and the Gospel of Matthew, the first word that is spoken as an action of ministry by Jesus is metanoia - to have a change of mind, but even more than that, because the Greek "meta" means not just to change, it's to go beyond and "noia" means mind. So when Jesus says metanoia, which we clumsily translate as repent, what Jesus is inviting of His disciples is to go beyond their normal understanding of themselves, of their world and of their God, and to be transformed from within and to be transformed fully.

Transformation is not something we can control. In fact, moments of transformation usually come to us in the midst of a crisis in which we are out of control, in which we have nothing to do, but surrender and accept and obey. And Jesus comes in the gospel of Matthew to somehow teach us to give up the transactions of this life in our life with God and to invite us to begin that transformation.

It begins, of course, in His own temptation in the wilderness in Matthew, when the devil goes to tempt Him and invites Him to engage in a transaction, if you are the son of God, turn these stones into bread, and Jesus says a word of scripture, that man should live by the bread of heaven, of the scriptures. And so Jesus enters into an action of transformation. He rejects the transactional quality of that exchange. And then later in Matthew, Jesus speaks about turning the other cheek or loaning without expecting repayment. Jesus calls tax collectors and sinners. He has tabled fellowship with them and seeks out the lost so that they might be saved.

And all of this brings us to where we are today. Transformations are powerful moments of change. They're powerful moments in which we go beyond what we normally imagine God to be like, and they have three elements. The first is that in a transformation, everything is retained. All of our histories, all of the things that we've done, all the things that we've left undone, all of our power and position, all of our privileges, all the things that we can call our own. These are all somehow retained by God. There is nothing that is yielded, nothing that is fully dropped away, but everything is transformed so that we suddenly see ourselves and who we are as fully enveloped in God's love.

And transformations are also involved in a kind of view of reality as it is. Not a world of our imagining, not an ideological theory that we can subscribe to, or that can claim us, not a philosophy we can live by, transformations force us to see reality. In fact, transformations often come to us in this way when there is a kind of disillusionment, when the scales fall from our eyes and we suddenly see

the reality of our world, the fragility of others, the incredible challenges before us, and our own limitations. It's in that reality the transformation occurs in a powerful way.

And finally, transformations are radically relational. When we experience transformation, we're not an individual engaging into some kind of economy of exchange, because that's a transaction. But we go through a profound change in which we realize that we are connected in a radical way to each other and to God. We see ourselves as somehow bound together and connected to each other in a powerful way.

All of this, I want to suggest to you, is what we have been going through in the Gospel of Matthew. When we meet Jesus in today's gospel, He returns as a King. And as I said, at the beginning of the service, the kingship of Jesus is something that goes beyond politics. It's not something that can be identified with a political party. It cannot be identified with a policy. It cannot be identified with a government. The kingship of Jesus is an invitation to transformation. In that transformation, there is a moment which everything is retained and that means all of us. This is why Jesus says that we must care for those who are hungry, those who are naked, those who are sick, those who are thirsty, those who are in prison, those who are strangers because the kingdom that Jesus is establishing - the kingdom of Jesus is establishing includes everyone. So Jesus, in this gospel is inviting us to experience the transformation that comes when we see the world as it is and includes everyone.

And finally, today's gospel speaks about radical relationality. We find God not in high places, not among the right sort of people, but we find God in the last, the least, and the lost, and finding God there, our salvation is bound up in them. So today's gospel is an invitation to transformation. It's a moment in which we have a vision of a future that we hope will never come true. That's why today's gospel is a kind of parable. It's meant to be a kind of specific kind of rhetorical device that is meant to get you thinking. And while you might be tempted to say to yourself, well, I'm doing pretty well, I give to charity, I live a good life. Maybe I'll be one of the sheep and not one of the goats. That is to mistake the point for the discourse, because what Jesus is inviting us to do today is to engage in that process of transformation and fill it with the realization that He is truly King and His kingdom is real and coming through you and me.

Walter Russell Bowie, a beautiful hymn writer and priest, he once had this prayer, which I'm going to summarize, he said, let thy kingdom come, but let it come through me. Today's gospel is an invitation to transformation. And it comes at just the right time for you and me, because if there's anything that this past year has been for us, it has been a time of transformation and invitation and opportunity for transformation, for recognizing that we are not in control, for recognizing that there's no way we are going to somehow buy our way out of

this. Recognizing that you and I need to be changed through and through, by a God who is greater than all things, and gives us everything, more than we can ask or imagine as we've read elsewhere. And today's gospel is an invitation for us to see ourselves again in the Bible's world and not simply to make Jesus relevant to ours. All of these things are bound up in today's gospel.

The painting I want to share with you today is by a person who is a well-known artist in New York City. His name is Jeffrey Hargrave. He came to me when I was a young priest, several years ago at this point. He wanted to somehow find his way back to the church and back to a relationship with God. He had suffered from incredible racism when he was in art school. He had been thrown out by his family because he was gay. He had been living on the streets of New York for a while and was homeless and suddenly was somehow discovered by a local gallery dealer in Soho. And he was suddenly having this kind of renaissance as a painter. And he was trying to hold it all together to understand what God was doing in his life.

And because God is gracious to us always and works through even imperfect people like you and me, somehow, we were able to somehow welcome him back into the church and he was baptized. And it was one of the most beautiful baptisms I've ever done. And he's one of the most important artists that I've ever done. He now is being represented by a major gallery in New York.

Anyways, he gave me this painting. It's called *Untitled* and I thought that was because he didn't know what to say. He painted it in 1998 just before he was baptized. I realize now that untitled wasn't a deliberate omission, but it was a kind of commentary on who this Jesus is and what the kingship of Christ looks like, because this is a depiction of Jesus as King. The background is beautiful gold, which is meant to symbolize His royal status. And the crown of thorns are not brown, but yellow, because that's meant to also symbolize that those crowns, those thorns are now his crown, a true crown. And this Jesus is suffering. This Jesus is in prayer. This Jesus is entering into difficulty. This Jesus is in some powerful way, modeling for us through His own death and resurrection, the transformation that we become part of when we become part of Him.

And so my question to you with this painting is, what is the transformation that God is working in your life? For Jeffrey, it was the realization that though he was among those who had been treated like a stranger, though he had been rejected and marginalized by his family, though he was experiencing incredible discrimination, that he was somehow worthy of God's love and a member of the body of Christ. And he was, to me, an indication of what it might be to be in relation with others who are so profoundly different from me. And so my relationship to him was one of transformation, and the kind of vision that I had of myself, my power, my privilege, all of these things were changed by that relationship that was founded in Christ.

So today's gospel is an invitation to us, no matter where we find ourselves in this story, whether we find ourselves struggling with a sickness or experiencing economic insecurity or going through some deep trouble, needing to be welcomed, needing to be loved, needing to be cared for. Or whether we find ourselves somehow body intact in the midst of this pandemic, looking for ways in which we can somehow cross the bridges that are there and close the distance between us and find our way to each other. Today's gospel is a reminder to those of us who have power and privilege, that we don't need to lose these things, but we have to use these things to make life better for others.

And this church is a place of transformation. This church is a place in which people come together as the body of Christ and live out the kingdom in our own way. God is not finished with us, certainly, but God has begun some powerful work in our lives to date. And as we finish this appeal to you, this time in which we lift up our support for the church, which needs to come by pledges. And we invite you to join us in pledging, pledging is one of the ways in which we can experience the most profound transformations in our life, because a pledge, which is an estimate of what we can support the church financially over the next year, a pledge as a way of stepping into a relationship with something as material as money.

We give a bit of ourselves and look for the ways we can be changed. And of course, over the next few weeks, you'll have other opportunities to step back and to see what God is doing in your life, what transformation God is inviting you into. The one thing that transformations teach us and I finish with it today, is they teach us to see every moment as a holy opportunity, as an opportunity to pay attention, have our eyes opened, our hearts open to step forward in faith, and to live as new beings, fully reconciled with what has come before we press on because Christ Jesus has made us His own.

Amen.

[End of Recording]