

***Plymouth's Mission I: Transforming (installment two of a three-part series)
"Meaningful Metanoia"***

Luke 9.28–36

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 14 February 2010

Sometimes something happens within us that is so significant people can tell the difference just by looking at us. Has anyone ever said to you, "You're just beaming!" And we don't necessarily take that in a literal way, but we know what it looks like when something wonderful has happened to someone, and their faces seem *radiant*. We even use the word, "radiant," to describe someone's visage.

Our second "Living Celtic Christianity" small group is reading a wonderful book by the Irish poet and philosopher, John O'Donohue, called *Anam Cara*, which means soul-friend in Gaelic. And O'Donohue comments on this outward mirror of what is going on inside us: "The face is the icon of the body, the place where the inner world of the person becomes manifest. The human face is the subtle yet visual autobiography of each person. Regardless of how concealed or hidden the inner story of your life is, you can never successfully hide from the world while you have a face. If we knew how to read the faces of others, we would be able to decipher the mysteries of their life stories. The face always reveals the soul; it is where the divinity of the inner life finds an echo and image. When you behold someone's face, you are gazing deeply into that person's life."¹

So, when the writer of Luke's gospel says that "while [Jesus] was praying, the appearance of his face changed," you can imagine the ways that reflects a monumental internal transformation.

For me, this story of the transfiguration isn't so much about what happened to Jesus up on that mountaintop as much as it begs the question: how does transformation happen to us – transformation so great as to change our visage...the way we project our face in the world.

Have you ever had such a moment? A time when something really shifted inside you? An occasion that moved you so deeply that people could see it on your face? I think for some women, the experience of childbirth can be such a moment. I don't know what those moments are for you, but I'd invite you to think about it for a just a minute: what are some of the transformative moments in your life?



The old-fashioned word for religious transformation is "conversion." In many New England Congregational churches in the 18th and early 19th centuries, at the time of the First and Second Great Awakenings, a visible sign of a conversion experience was a requirement for full membership in the church. That said, the Unitarian Congregationalists and middle-of-the-road Trinitarian Congregationalists didn't take much stock in fantastic experiences of the divine. (This was a serious controversy that divided Congregational churches across New England.) Yet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was ordained as a Congregational minister and eventually became a Unitarian talked much about "first-hand religion" or a direct experience of the divine, rather than the sometimes cool, intellectual apprehension of the faith that is still a hallmark of many of us in the Congregational strand of the UCC.

The word, "conversion," can be alienating for some of us, just like the related term, "repentance." Conversion, in its Latin roots, literally means to "turn with" and repentance means to "reposition" something. The Greek word, *metanoia*, can mean conversion or

¹ John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*. (NY: Harper Perennial, 1998), p. 39.

repentance or transformation. *Metanoia* (and I'm going to translate it as "transformation") is a wonderful and important action in our lives of faith. *Metanoia* keeps us from becoming stale and static and self-satisfied.

I was reading an article in the Jesuit magazine, *America*, and Valerie Schultz, a Roman Catholic writer had this to say: "*Metanoia* is a word I love. It sounds like a medical condition or a punk band. I can picture it on a prescription bottle or a T-shirt. But it is a word that has stuck with me from university theology classes, Greek for "change of mind" ... *Metanoia* is more lasting than a momentary epiphany, more active than an intellectual revelation. *Metanoia* is a radical change of heart, forcing one to dig deeply. It is a prayer answered, but it requires a further response."²

For me, and I suspect for many of you, conversion or *metanoia* or transformation isn't a one-off, lightning bolt kind of experience. (If it is that's great...but I want to ask how it continues to affect your life.) I have had times when I really felt in touch with God, moments when I felt as though God was with me and moving through me. But, if I look at my faith journey, I see many moments of transformation...like coming back to church in my 30s, becoming a parent, going to divinity school, feeling called to be the minister of this church. And sometimes I think we see transformation better in retrospect than we do at the moment. *Metanoia* happens, too, in the unhappy occasions of our lives. When my parents died, when my marriage ended: those are moments of transformation as well. For me, the big question is "Where do I find God in that experience?" What are those moments for you?



In our church's mission statement, we say: "It is our mission to worship God and help make God's realm visible in the lives of people, individually and collectively, especially as it is set forth in the life, teachings, death and living presence of Jesus Christ. We do this by... (now look into your bulletin, and you'll see a little graphic on the insert)...inviting, **transforming**, and sending.

How would you react if I said that we all need to experience transformation...not just once, but again and again? I think a fair number of us at Plymouth think that we are evolved and enlightened...in short, that we have *arrived*. I hate to be the one to break the news...but *all of us* are in need of further transformation; we are works in progress, not fully formed, and ready for growth.

Every day, we encounter some new situation or condition or challenge, and in the course of those new experiences, we are going to be changed. The question is not whether we will be transformed, but how. In what ways can we make the deep changes in our lives shape us in positive, faithful ways?

What are the tectonic forces in our lives and in our souls that with great heat and force shape the persons we are becoming. Are we being forced into a mold by the economic forces around us? *What do the teachings of Jesus say about that?* Are we succumbing to the prejudices of racism, homophobia, and sexism that underlie every aspect of our culture? *What do the teaching of Jesus say about that?* Are we falling prey to having enough income and leisure time so that we neglect enhancing lives of others? *What do the teachings of Jesus say about that?* Are we becoming complacent about caring for one another because we are "too busy?" *What do the teachings of Jesus say about that?*

We need to let our faith become the greatest tectonic force in our lives. If we can't allow ourselves to be molded, shaped, and transformed by our faith, then frankly, it is

² Valerie Schultz, "Metanoia," in *America*, December 6, 2003.
http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=3325

meaningless. None of us wants to have a hollow faith, but rather one that is vibrant, resilient, and life-giving.

I suggest that during Lent, we look at ourselves and that we use the 40-day period to examine ourselves and in what ways we need to be transformed into the people God expects us to be. How do we do that? One way may be by adopting a small faith practice during Lent, which begins on Wednesday with Ash Wednesday. It doesn't have to be dramatic, like fasting during each day and eating only at night. And it doesn't have to be "giving up" something like chocolate or booze or Fritos. I knew someone once who gave up his wristwatch for Lent, because he felt that he was being ruled by the god, Chronos!

I also have an invitation for you, which is something I did with our confirmation class about five years ago: read the Gospel According to Luke during Lent. I invite everyone at Plymouth to do this, in the fashion of Fort Collins Reads. But, instead of reading *Holes* or *The Tortilla Curtain*, we'll read Luke's gospel as our common Lenten spiritual discipline. (I know that some of you have read it before, and that you already know the ending, but if you read it over the course of the next month and a half, I guarantee that Palm Sunday and Easter will be richer for you this year.) And for those of us with kids, a children's Bible works well for this...just take a few minutes before dinner for some shared devotional time with your children. So, I designed a little bookmark with a schedule of reading for you. Again, this is an invitation, not homework...you don't *have* to do it, and you won't get any extra credit points if you do, but see if reading the story again offers any insights into your own journey of transformation.



We have a wonderful new members class going on right now, and one of the things that will happen next Sunday is that we will welcome into full membership those who wish to enter a covenant with this congregation. (Sharon and I will **not** be cross-examining them to determine if they have had a true conversion experience!) But, they will enter a covenant with these words...the promises that all of our members have made: "I give myself unreservedly to God and to God's service."

Soren Kierkegaard made a distinction between Christ's admirers and Christ's true followers, and I think you can hear that being echoed in our covenant. Kierkegaard writes, "The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. He always plays it safe. Though in word [s]he is inexhaustible about how highly [s]he prizes Christ, [s]he renounces nothing, will not reconstruct [her] life, and will no let her life express what it is [s]he supposedly admires."³ In short, the admirer won't admit Christ into the process of transformation.

When we take those words seriously and try to live into that tall order, we open ourselves and our lives to being changed, to being transformed, to be shaped by *metanoia*. As we journey together, may this band of pilgrim people walk as one, into a future that is marked by God's promise of changed lives.

Amen.

³ Kierkegaard quoted in *Bread and Wine* (Farmington, NY: Plough, 2003), p. 60.