

“The Journey of Transformation”

Exodus 24.12–18 & Matthew 17.1–9

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 2 February 2008

Sometimes something happens within us that 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.

In the small group that I began, called “Living Celtic Christianity,” we are 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 Matthew’s gospel says that Jesus’ “face shone like the sun,” you can imagine the ways that reflects a monumental internal transformation. Or... perhaps we can’t imagine such a huge 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 moment: what are some of the transformative moments in your life?



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.

Have you experienced moments of transformation here at Plymouth? Have there been occasions when your feeling or your thinking has changed as a result of something that has happened in this place? It may not have occurred in worship or even in a class or a fellowship group. But, such occasions might have provided the catalyst for a change of heart or mind that made a difference to you.

If you have been here for more than a couple of years and haven’t been touched by something that you’ve seen or heard or thought or felt, you might need to take a time-out and work on opening your heart and mind. (I’ll talk more about that in a moment.)

A week or two ago, I was watching Bill Moyers interview the well-known author John Grisham on PBS. Grisham is a Southern Baptist, active in his faith and progressive in his thinking. Moyers asked if he had been born again, and Grisham replied, “Yes, when I was

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

eight years old.” There was some kind of a transformative experience that Grisham had, but is that it?!? We have an experience of transformation (the old-fashioned theological word is *conversion*) when we are in elementary school, and that is supposed to keep us going for the next 70 or 80 years?

I like the idea of experiencing spiritual transformation – being born again or having a conversion – differently at different points in my life. For me it isn’t a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but a series of points that form a lifelong journey of faith.

So, what have been your moments of spiritual transformation, or being born anew or born again? Perhaps you can’t answer that easily off the top of your head, and that’s fine. But, if you can’t identify several points in your life when your sense of spirituality and faith have been transformed, I would ask that you spend some time in the next week pondering that.



If we open ourselves, we can experience transformation, but we have to be willing to experience change. The same is true for churches – we can be transformed as communities of faith, but we have to be open to it.

What if Plymouth had decided to play it safe back in the 1970s when we called Fred Edmonds as our senior minister? Fred was not an ethnic German; he was a dedicated proponent of civil rights for all people; and he had a way of engaging the wider community in uniting our personal faith and social responsibility. Fred’s ministry changed Plymouth irrevocably. If you want to see what Plymouth might have looked like without Fred’s ministry, you can take a look at any number of UCC churches in northeastern Colorado that have refused to change over the years. They are dying churches.

And what if Plymouth hadn’t done some serious discernment in 2003 about where we feel called to go and to grow? Perhaps we wouldn’t have over 20 people (most of them younger than me) in our new members’ class. And we certainly wouldn’t have updated and expanded our facilities to welcome new members. Think of the potential this affords our congregation in reaching out to people who are hungering for the kind of Christian message this congregation espouses!

So, I want to affirm you, as a congregation, for opening yourself to what the Spirit is saying to you, and being willing to embrace change in response. We keep growing as a congregation only so long as we stay open to where the Spirit is leading us.



Going back to our individual transformation, how do we stay open to the guidance of the Spirit, and how do we jump-start our openness to transformation? Spiritual practices or disciplines can help... things that Protestants didn’t typically do when I was a child: centering prayer, fasting, observing a Lenten discipline. I’m not talking just giving up chocolate, but it could be giving up something that blocks your access to God or keeps you stuck.

This is a part of what John Bell was talking about in his sermon during the second service when he talked about letting go of his anger toward the physician who misdiagnosed his mother, and then he took a further step and wrote the man a letter. That’s transformative!

If you need help finding a spiritual discipline that fits for you, Sharon or I would be happy to talk with you with some suggestions.

The Spirit’s movement is like a stream that we are invited to wade into. We don’t necessarily have to be Olympic swimmers or do anything than open ourselves to the

flow...to allow ourselves to be swept into the current of Christ's transformative power. Sometimes what we need to do is learn how to get out of the way and let God do the rest.

Transformation is not optional for Christians...it's central to who we are. So, I invite you to take a dip during Lent: Come on in, the water is fine!

Amen.