

BE YE TRANSFORMED
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St. John's UU Church
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SERMON:

Think back to Martin Luther King, Jr., Day this past January. It's January 21st, just a few days before the South Carolina Primary. The place, Myrtle Beach, on the South Carolina coast. The event, a debate between the three leading Democratic Party contenders, Hilary Clinton, John Edwards, and Barack Obama.

Time has run out, but moderator, Wolf Blitzer, has one final question. He asks, "If Dr. Martin Luther King were alive today, ... why do you think he would or why should he endorse you?"

Two of the candidates find ways to claim Dr. King. Barack Obama responds,

Well, I don't think Dr. King would endorse any of us. I think what he would call upon the American people to do is to hold us accountable, and this goes to the core differences, I think, in this campaign. I believe change does not happen from the top down. It happens from the bottom up. Dr. King understood that.... It was those women who were willing to walk instead of ride the bus, union workers who are willing to take on violence and intimidation to get the right to organize. It was women who decided, "I'm as smart as my husband. I'd better get the right to vote." them arguing, mobilizing, agitating, and ultimately forcing elected officials to be accountable, I think that's the key.

<http://www.cfr.org/publication/15300/>

Many of us hear here a voice calling for transformation. That a bi-racial man could win a major party's nomination for President has been transformative for our nation. That an African American wins the presidency, propelled by an up and coming generation, is transformative for our people. Not since 9/11 have the people of the United Nations been joined in a sense of shared destiny, not of fear but hope!

But Barack Obama suggests something more. If we really hope for our world, if we really expect transformation, that change begins at home, that transformation begins with you and me. It's bottom up, not top down. Transformation is about you, not about Barack Obama.

Transformation is a word we hear a lot about these days, one of those words which emerges from the deep undercurrents of our culture promising hope and renewed courage. Certainly it's not a new word. Religion has always been about change. We think of traditional Christianity being about moving from sin to righteousness, from damnation to salvation, being born again.

One Bible verse I find most meaningful comes from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, a normative book of the New Testament. This verse is in our gray hymnal; in selection 712, St. Paul urges

us “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Be transformed by the renewing of your mind... I hope that’s part of why you come here to St. John’s on Sunday: to be renewed, to be renewed in your mind, your perspective on your life shifted, expanded.

Scientifically trained, particularly in biology, considering myself a strict Darwinian, I wonder what this transformation is all about. I am struck with the feminist author Barbara Ehrenreich writing about religious ritual from an evolutionary perspective. In BLOOD RITES she says ritual, religious ceremony has its origins in the “primal transformation from prey to predator;” (page 120) -- on the African savannahs, humans evolved from prey to predator, and ritual was how one generation taught the next to make that move.

St. Paul’s renewing of our minds, then is about no longer being victim, transformation is moving beyond victimization, but what is it about? Okay, who wants to be prey, but do you not also reject becoming predatory?

Transformation is a great cultural theme of our day. Many are reading David Korten’s THE GREAT TURNING. He talks about a shift he calls “From Empire to Earth Community”. He calls for the same shift from hierarchy to partnership that Rupert Ross explored in our reading. Bottom up, not top down.

Consider a list of the transformations people are advocating:

From empire to earth community;
from fossil fuel to renewable energy;
from top down to bottom up;
from hierarchy to partnership;
from racism to post-racism;
from victim to, let’s leave that one for a moment;
from faith based to reality based
from consumer to citizen;
from master-slave to partnership
from me to we....

a shifting of perspective from me to we

Bill Schulz is a former President of the UUA and while executive Director of Amnesty International USA spent some time in Rwanda following the genocide there. He relates how part of the problem was people had become habituated to living within hierarchy. A Hutu man told how a car went by with a loudspeaker calling for all Hutus to defend themselves. He started killing his nearest neighbors, an old Tutsi woman and two young children. He thought it was okay because, in his words, “the **authorities** said the Tutsis were enemies.” (Sharon Welch, REAL PEACE, REAL SECURITY, xiii)

Where does transformation take place? Transformation takes place with other people, it takes place in family. Rupert Ross' book, RETURNING TO THE TEACHINGS, is about his efforts to address what as whites we would call criminal behavior in indigenous communities in Canada. A lot of his work has been undoing the hierarchical solutions of white culture intervening in how indigenous communities address "bad" behavior, what they call behavior that throws the community out of balance, out of harmony.

A lot of that behavior, alcoholism, domestic and sexual abuse, he considers to have resulted from the interjection of white domination. A chief of an indigenous community was only considered a chief as long as needed. He or she might be more of a task leader than someone with the authority to punish miscreants. White culture came along and said, "Take me to your leader." Through this recognition, chiefs began to have power over their people, as he was supported by white society. Domestic violence was one of the results of the domination of European cultural hierarchical perspective.

When we think about family, most of contemporary Americans don't think too much beyond the nuclear family: perhaps the grandparents if living and the siblings. The eldest generation is the focus and when they go, the children often loose much connection. Of course the Obama family seems different from this. His aunt was an illegal alien in New York City. His grandmother in Kenya celebrated his election. What a different sense of family the President-elect has than I do. What's your family like? Do you have family that you have talked with in Africa? Europe? Asia, South America?

The indigenous communities Ross worked with, aunts, uncles, cousins, lived together in village. When someone abused a cousin or someone else, the entire community would address it. They understood that the entire community was thrown off balance. Sending someone to jail, a pattern Ross was trying to break, usually just made everything worse. It kept the silence about what had happened and perpetuated the cycle of abuse. Instead of healing the victim, it continued to generate more victims. Alternatively, the community met, leading with the wisdom of the elders, lifting the secrets binding the souls of victim and abusers. The work of the indigenous community kept the perpetrators in the community as well as the victims, turning both prey and perpetrator into healers. Perhaps there is no greater transformation than this, from victim, **not** to abuser, but to healer.

In our small nuclear families, we try various ways. Of course the most important path of transformation is child rearing. Not an easy path to walk. All too often, we want our children to be perfect, which often means, not just like me, but just like my idealized self or my idealized hero. Sort of faith based child rearing rather than reality based child rearing. Parents walk a precarious line between allowing their child to be themselves and socializing them into our society. We want our children to realize their own inner potential. On the other hand, we don't want society to reject our child, or his peers in school to bully them on the play ground. And on another hand, we don't want our child to be conformed to our society as it is today, growing up biased, a consumer

Let's face it, we want our children to be perfect, but there's no perfect way of creating perfect children.

I think my mother most likely thought of herself as pretty progressive. She wanted me to be perfect, I'm sure of that, just like my father. I'll leave the rest to Sigmund Freud

One day when I was about twelve, in fact I think it was my twelfth birthday, there was no school for some reason, a school day off because she was at work and I was not in school. I went to the movies. I lined up for tickets, and some other kid began picking on me. He knocked my glasses off. I chased him.

Wouldn't you know it, I got picked up by the police.

My mother came down to the police station. I think she was horrified. Anyway, it was enough for her to think I needed to see a therapist. In some ways that was good. It was my mother giving her blessing to me to see a therapist whenever I need to. In some ways, it was not good.

Kids aren't perfect and parents expectations that their children are going to be perfect doesn't help. While some behavior needs to be overlooked, other behavior needs to be addressed by parents.

Do you have the family you want, you thought you would have? How different families are today. When I was growing up, we knew little about the biochemistry of behavior. The explosion of our knowledge of the biochemistry of the human body has made medication part of child rearing practices. On one hand medications seem almost to work miracles. Yet, there is a fine line as we hear about the abuse of prescription meds. Teaching our children why it is good to take one pill and not another adds to the challenges of modern child rearing, our fears whether they will be able to live productively on their own. In their search for the first dog, the Obama family keeps in mind that daughter Malia is allergic. They could medicate her so they could take home any mutt they found at the pound. Instead, they look for a non-allergenic mutt. Each child brings their own gifts into a family. A Down's syndrome child may not grow up to be a free marketer, but he offers the gift of love.

Walking the fine line between letting a child be who she is and who we want her to be is not easy. Khalil Gibran reminds us that finally,

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of life's, longing for itself.

You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.

The Archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and bends you with might that the arrows may go swift and far.

Let your bending in the Archer's hand be for gladness.

Parenting is a transformational. More than parents growing up children, children grow up parents. In our families we deepen our sense of the shift from me to we

The lyrics for the Anthem the Choir sang this morning are selection number 457 in the gray hymnal:

I am only one
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything,
But still I can do something.
And because I cannot do everything
I will not refuse to do the something I can do.

Once again we hear that it is up to us, not up to someone else, not up to George W Bush, not up to Barack Obama. If you want change, transformation, be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Our salvation, our healing lies in shifting perspective, from isolation to community, from hierarchy to partnership, from me to we. A variation on the Serenity Prayer goes:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change,
The courage to change the one I can,
And the wisdom to know it's me.

As Gandhi calls to us, "**You** must be the change you want to see in the world."