

Feast of the Transfiguration
August 6, 2017
Luke 9:28-36
The Rev. Carenda Baker

This week I received a Facebook invitation from someone I haven't seen or heard from in forty years. The invitation was to become part of the Facebook group of the Carlisle High School Class of 1977. Browsing the page, I saw that there is a reunion of the class scheduled for September 16th, a little more than a month from now. This is the first time I have ever known of a scheduled reunion for my high school graduating class. I have not decided whether or not to attend. Some witty person declared that only the very rich and the very thin actually want to attend their school reunions.

The pushback I hear in my head says: Just let me keep my "Kodak memory moments", thank you very much! If there is any forty year old unpleasantness it can just stay where it is, buried and well out of sight. The Rev. Flora Slosson Wuellner in her article titled *"Transformation: Our Fear, Our Longing"* writes of the paradox we face with change. If I was to go to my 40th high school class reunion, it would be quickly evident how I and my classmates have changed. I would expect there to be gray hair and less hair, wrinkles, expanded waistlines, people who are now mothers and grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers in place of those who were once young vibrant friends. Jobs and daily routines have taken the place of bright expectations, hopes and dreams of doing something new and startling in the world. Underneath all those changes there lies a bittersweet kind of homesickness, nostalgia for the way things were, the way we were. And we all know we cannot go back.*

At the same time that we long for the past, another part of us fears that we have NOT changed, or not changed enough. Is it a compliment when we are told, "You haven't changed a bit"? I'm never sure. In the eyes of those who knew us way back then, we might wonder if we will still be seen in those old categories that defined us: the shy one, the brilliant one, the class clown, the unpopular or snooty one, the one to be chosen last to dance or for a sports team, the one who was never elected to any office, or the one elected for everything and expected to do all the work. The one voted "most likely to succeed". People may see that we have never evolved from that ugly duckling into the swan.*

In every great transition of our lives – graduation, marriage, promotion, moving to a new home, parenthood, grandparenthood, older age – we encounter this two-sided fear. The first anxious question is: "Where is the life I am used to?" Sometimes we feel a sense of depression and lethargy when we face a new experience. The old routine is

gone forever. But at the same time there is a second anxious question: “Will I ever really move an inch? Will I be stuck with the same old me, caught in the same old habits? Will I ever really change at all? At any moment I could make an awful mistake which will prove to everyone (including me) that I haven’t and never will change.*

Life is all about navigating the many faces of change. At its core, today’s gospel story of Jesus’ transfiguration insists that change is difficult but needed. Just before today’s reading, Jesus has been healing and performing miracles. He later asks the disciples, “Who do the people say I am?” Well, Lord, they think you are one of the prophets – John the Baptist, Elijah or another of the ancient prophets come back to life.” “And you”, says Jesus, “who do you say I am?” Peter speaks up and declares, “You are the Messiah of God.” Jesus tells them not to mention this to anyone, and immediately he shares with them for the first time that he will suffer, be killed, and three days later be raised from the dead.

Drastic change is certainly afoot, out there someplace in the not too distant future for Jesus and the disciples. Eight days after his first foretelling of these things to come, Jesus goes up to a mountain to pray, taking with him Peter, James, and John. The key moments in Jesus’ life, according to Luke, all happen when Jesus is praying. At his baptism while Jesus is praying, God steps in directly and gets involved, speaking to Jesus alone, calling him the beloved Son, with whom God is pleased. Here on the mountain, when Jesus is praying, again, God is on the scene. This time Jesus is joined by two visitors Moses and Elijah. Moses who received God’s law on Mt. Sinai and brought it down to the people carved on tablets of stone. Moses who led the Israelites to freedom from slavery in Egypt. And the prophet Elijah, who was expected to return just before the Messiah appeared. Moses and Elijah talk with Jesus about his departure Luke says. In Greek, the word translated “departure” is “exodus”. Jesus will lead a new and final exodus, to be accomplished in the coming days in Jerusalem - in his suffering, death and resurrection.

The splendor and power, the holiness and glory of God fill the air there on the mountaintop. At the sight of these two holy men of Israel, and Jesus’ face shining with the evidence of his fully human, fully divine self, Peter is dumbstruck and left babbling. “Let’s pitch three tents here, Lord. One for you, Moses, and Elijah. This is so awesome! Let’s stay right here for a while, Lord.” While Peter is still babbling, the cloud descends over them and the voice declares, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

Peter’s instinct is very human and so natural, to want to savor and hold on to those moments of awe that take his breath away, those moments when we know God has gotten involved. Who wouldn’t want to bask in the glory and light of God’s presence?

The disciples' world is being rocked, though at that point they don't know why it's happening or what it means, this direct experience of revelation about who Jesus is. I can imagine Peter feels caught, caught in that suspended place between wanting things to stay the same and knowing that there is some big and holy change afoot.

Nothing permanent, just a temporary shelter, a tent, Peter suggests. To give us more time, to hold on to what we know we won't have forever. If they stay long enough, maybe they can at least capture this moment to help carry them through the change that is to come.

Can you imagine what Peter might be thinking at this point? "But Lord, I'm not ready for change now. I don't know if I can handle it. I'm not prepared. And I'm not ready to leave here just yet". Peter, James and John will definitely need to remember this moment later on – call to mind the glory, the confirmation, the assurance, the promise, the declaration, and that command, "Listen to him!" They will go down the mountain in silence, and immediately face human need - a boy needing to be healed and delivered from the torment of a demon. Following that healing, with everyone astounded at the greatness of God, Jesus will once again tell them about the betrayal, the day coming when he will be turned over to Roman authorities for trial.

One of the hardest things about change is this dance between holding on and letting go. Simultaneously holding on to what was, while looking toward the hope of what can be. It can be excruciating facing into change. Change insists that we exist in a place we don't want to be. Change demands that we abide in a space of yet to be resolution. Change creates a sense of grief over what was, and yet brings with it the promise of something fresh and promising to come.

Often we're right there with our brother Peter. Not ready for change. Not wanting to be disturbed and coaxed out of our safe and comfortable places in order to follow God's leading, God's desire for us to become more whole, more Christ-like, filled more fully with God's loving presence. We too, resist the change, the transformation God wants to work in us to be formed into the fully human, fully alive people God intends for us to be.

Sometimes we get stuck, unable to move through change into deeper transformation because there are places in us that need healing. Our growth as Christians can be stalled or blocked by patterns of behavior that are symptoms of deep pain. A tendency to worry. Hair-trigger angry responses. The compulsive need to over-control. Manipulating or closing ourselves off to others. These symptoms of deep pain are caused by old wounds. Some resentment festers from a wrong done to us. A betrayal. A disappointment. Some slander or falsehood spoken about us. A great loss of some

kind. Such unhealed wounds leave us reacting rather than responding. Such wounds need to be healed through the light and love of Christ. Confession alone will not free us from their hold on us. Healing, the touch of Christ is needed to set us free.*

The good news is that we have glimpsed God in the full humanity of Jesus. Facing our need for change, we can allow and invite God to transform us and lead us to new life, in a new direction, on new paths of service. St. Irenaeus of Lyon, a theologian of the early church living in the second century said, "The glory of God is humanity fully alive; and to be alive consists in beholding God." Facing into change leads to *our* becoming the glory of God, authentically human and fully alive. Letting the Spirit move to transform us, we grow into mature sons and daughters of God. Being healed, we are then more able and ready to reflect the light and glory of God that we have seen in Jesus, and experienced in his life, death, and resurrection.

For at least a period of a year while I was in a time of deep change, moving through the process to become a priest, I prayed the following prayer, based on the experience of one of the beloved Celtic saints, St. Brendan:

"Lord, I will trust You; help me journey beyond the familiar and into the unknown.
Give me the faith to leave old ways and break fresh ground with You.
Christ of the mysteries, can I trust You to be stronger than each storm in me?
Do I still yearn for Your glory to lighten on me?
I will show others the care You have given me.
I determine amidst all uncertainty always to trust.
I choose to live beyond regret, and let You recreate my life.
I believe you will make a way for me and provide for me, if only I trust you, listen and obey.
I will trust in the darkness and know that my times are still in Your hand.
I will believe you for my future, chapter by chapter, until all the story is written.
Focus my mind and my heart upon You, my attention always on You without alteration.
Strengthen me with Your blessing and appoint to me the task.
Teach me to live with eternity in view.
Tune my spirit to the music of heaven, my heart to the sound of Your voice.
Feed me, and, somehow, make my listening and following, my obedience count for You."

(from "Celtic Daily Prayer" of the Northumbria Community).

Change, friends, is inevitable. Growth is optional. Today as we share the bread and cup of Christ's very presence, in a blessed feast of revealing and healing, let us open our hearts, our lives to be transformed, here made fully alive to reflect the light, the goodness, and glory of God. Our lives, *our* faces are meant to shine radiantly in the world with that glory. May it be so for us. *Amen.*

**The beginning and other portions of this sermon are based on the article "Transformation: Our Fear, Our Longing" by The Rev. Flora Slosson Wuellner as published in the journal Weavings. Vol. VI, no. 2, March/April 1991.*