

"The Challenges of Transformation"

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 15:15-21; Psalm 26:1-8;
Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

(Just to give you a little heads up, I'm going to be preaching basically from the Pauline text, the letter to the Romans that we heard read to us this morning.)

Transformation. That's what was expected of David. David was a 15 year old, slightly built youth incarcerated for burglary, for theft, and as we called it in New Zealand in those days, converting automobiles (or stealing cars). He was rough, he was quick of tongue, and he was defiant. And it was my job back then, in another life, to receive him into custody in the courtroom and take to the remand center where I was second in command, where he was to serve his time and we were to transform him. That was our challenge.

Now Paul, dealing with the Roman community, is helping them deal with a challenge. You see, they were a small Christian community, certainly not a big noise in Rome; they were a small community beginning to live out the life of discipleship and if they are to do that, they had to be well differentiated from Roman culture . . . otherwise the culture would engulf them and they would no longer exist. So Paul writes to them, a small insignificant minority in the most powerful capital of the world. Though they have not yet identified the Romans as evil (although they might well), Paul reminds them not to repay evil for evil, not even to name evil but to overcome the evil they encounter by living exemplary lives, both within their community and with those outside it. And this principally will be achieved by their transformation. Hopefully such transformation will rub off on those around the community and transform others, bringing them into the community of faith. Which leaves us with a question, doesn't it? Where are we in our transformation, if indeed, we are to be the children of God, the brothers and sisters of Christ in the world?

You see, we are in sort of the same position as the minority community of Christians were in Rome. We're not in Washington, but we're close enough to it; and we are a community of Christians in the most powerful nation in the world. In fact, we're a community of faith in a nation so powerful that there has been none other like it in the whole history of creation. And the problem for us is that the boundaries between us and the world, between our community of faith and the culture out there, those boundaries have become blurred and indistinct to the point that it's very difficult to tell the difference between what happens out there and what happens in here.

For some this is good news. It means that there is no distinction; that our nation faith and the communities in which we live are identical. And this, my friends, has become an

exceptionally potent force these days in the life and politics of America. Other people throw up their hands in horror that finally the church has succumbed to the ways of the world and, having done so, has lost its unique identity and has become impotent and irrelevant and has nothing to offer the world. It's as though for some, the Christian community has been subject to identity theft.

That was David's biggest problem when we locked him up. He lost all his identity once he was incarcerated; he was no longer **the** David who broke into houses, who led the gang, who stole cars . . . because he wasn't running with the gang. He was 200 miles from his hometown, and he was just one of a number of other offenders in custody. We had rules. The rules weren't meant to change peoples' lives, the rules were meant to point out to these young men that there are consequences to the choices one makes.

I know you're just dying to hear what the rules were. They were simple and few: any instruction from any member of the staff would be obeyed without question. Rule number 2: any verbal obscenity or swearing was not permitted. Rule number 3: no one but no one, staff or inmate, was to use the words "shut up". Very simple rules, and kept strictly. Three offenses (which seems to be the thing in America these days), three offenses: strike number one - hair removed until your scalp looked something like a very conserved tennis ball; strike number two - confinement, either to a room or to a lockup, depending; and strike number three - striking across the buttocks with a leather strap. Not punishment but consequences; not given out randomly but as a result of actions chosen.

But, we also enrolled David in a local high school, and there we monitored his work, we helped him with his homework at the institution, we kept a close watch with his teachers and the school administrators, and we left him free to find his own way to school from us and back again. His address and residence at the school were the street address of the institution, but not its name. And we provided for him, as we did for the others, an environment of order and support while he was with us.

And David began to change. Oh not overnight, but gradually. Under the influence of the staff, interacting with his peers, settling into school to work, and regular school attendance, slowly and surely David was allowing himself to change; he was being transformed.

And that's what Paul is speaking to the Christian community in Rome about - allowing the presence and power of God in Christ to transform them. Not overnight, instantly, but to transform them nonetheless over time. And to help them understand what they were confronting, he presents them with what I like to call a theological sandwich. (And if you haven't recognized it already, the similarities between that community of faith in Rome and this community of faith here are dramatic indeed.) There are two layers of bread to this sandwich. The first one is the layer that says "Hate what is evil", and the concluding words of the passage, the second layer of bread if you will, "do not be overcome by evil, overcome evil with good; do not repay evil for evil."

Sounds very simple and I am sure lots of preachers could go on at length about this. But that's to avoid the problem of identifying that which is evil. Put three Lutheran

theologians in a room and you'll have twenty-seven opinions as to what is evil and what is good. But it's the same for us, is it not? This huge problem that's associated with being able to identify correctly those people, those things, those events, those practices which we would like to label as evil. Neither the church nor the world is able to agree. What are we to overcome? How is it to be avoided? What are we to hate? It's just that we can't do it.

Do you remember what Jesus said? The story he told about the farmer who had his land planted and his faithful servants came rushing in to say that tares were growing in the wheat - do you remember the story - where the servants wanted to get right out there and rip those tares out and get rid of them? And Jesus said, no, they would just mash the wheat as well, so just leave them alone and when it's time for the harvest, I'll take care of it.

Did you hear the Gospel? When Christ comes with the power of the Spirit, He'll take care of reaping. I know a lot of pastors would like to run with this and take it into a political realm, but the political realm is exactly what the community of faith attempts to differentiate itself from. Governments can't do these sorts of things, or they can but not in the way a community of faith would do it. And this doesn't apply to the government or to anyone else out there. These things about which Paul speaks are the practices and behaviors here, in the community of faith, so while it's fine to say "hate evil", it's another thing to recognize it. Even Adam and Eve couldn't see it when it was on the dessert plate in front of their noses.

Read carefully, though, Paul begins to reveal that he isn't talking about the evil of people in government; rather he's addressing a systemic evil that exists throughout all creation. The reality of an evil that's there, a presence and a power that not only abides in the world, but abides in the world because it abides in us. Do you remember what Martin Luther said about us, himself included? We are at the same time saints and sinners - like an angel food cake with a swirl through it, and we can either bring good into being or evil into being, we don't need a red Pillsbury dough boy with a three-pronged fork to do it for us.

What are we going to make incarnate in the world? The forces of good or the forces of evil? And you see, that's a problem for us because there's a human tendency we all share that when things aren't going the way they ought to go, or the way we think they should go, or in ways that are contradictory to the ways we think are the right ways, then we find ourselves getting ourselves into confrontation, conflict and war. It's human in us to need to know who's to blame, who's at fault, with whom to be angry, who's the villain. And how are we going to get back at them and even the score?

But Paul is talking about us being good Christian soldiers, not at war with the enemies which are flesh and blood, but that enemy which is an ever present darkness in our world and in corners of our lives. So having cautioned us and warned us, as he warned the Romans, then he talks about overcoming evil with good. What does he mean? He talks about four major areas.

The first is love and affection. Love to Christians isn't the smoochy stuff (although Christians enjoy the smoochy stuff); the love that Paul is talking about is the love that puts one at service of the other. (I bet if we were to talk to you, Grace and Vince, you'd be able to tell us that it's not you, individually, being right in your marriage, but you individually serving the other out of care and compassion in your marriage.) And affection. The reality of affection for the Christian community is that we care about one another. Next time we're made at one another over something, let's stop for a moment and realize there are times when we do stuff that makes others made as well. But instead of griping and sniping, let's be affectionate, care for one another.

The second category Paul gives us is honor and hospitality. Do you realize that you look into the eyes of Christ when you look into the eyes of your neighbor, everyone in the world made in the image of God? Surely then, the way of the Christian community, the way of the community of faith, is to honor one another and to be hospitable to all. The way to change us in the world, the way to change our neighbors in the world, is not to lay down a hundred rules and force them into certain behaviors. The way to win their hearts and their souls and introduce them to the transforming Christian life is to invite them with compassion and understanding and kindness and forgiveness into a new way of being where they can begin to identify the consequences for choices and find themselves transformed.

Remember what Christ says, what He taught the disciples about His time coming? About losing life to save it? When as a Christian community are living in this transformed way, we don't expect results from others; we give without the thought of result, allowing the freedom of the other to respond.

David could have gone his own way for the length of his sentence and been released. Or he could have opened himself and allowed himself to change and be changed by the very nature of the experience itself. I had an old theology professor who used to tell me, "Pastor, you catch more flies with honey than you ever will with vinegar." So, David served his sentence. I had to physically carry him from the institution to the cab that was to take him back into the world. But come to think of it, his reluctance to go is no greater than our reluctance to leave this hallowed space, to walk out into the world, and to take up the challenge of being transformed and living as transformed people in the world. For unlike David, we are able to return here next Sunday to find forgiveness and refreshment, love and companionship, and strength. And to celebrate the wonderful things that happen in the life of our married members when they celebrate their 68th wedding anniversary.

David couldn't come back to the institution. And though I don't really know what has happened to David, I often think of him and carry him in my prayers. But this I do know, David has not been back into the criminal justice system.

Amen.

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