

"WITH GLAD AND GENEROUS HEARTS"

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Transformation is what the church is all about: being changed at our depths till it shines in our faces and rings with gladness in our attitudes, outlooks and actions. Transformation from being self-interested slobs, making sure we always look out for number one--and good luck to the rest of you--into people living out a bigger story; people more interested in how God feels about the course of human events and how God perceives our needs.

But transformation doesn't occur as we think. It is less about lightning bolts from heaven, surging rushes of intense feeling leading to a waking and walking nirvana, or summiting a mountain with dawning enlightenment. I climbed an 18,000 foot volcano. All I felt was half the oxygen of sea level: dizzy, light-headed, and eager to descend. Mother Theresa said faithfulness is less about doing great things, and more about doing small things greatly.

Take our children after the summer break. Some I now hardly recognize. They've grown a whole head, some of them. Infants have become toddlers, children have become teens, and teens stare us in the eye us as fully-grown peers. How did that transformation occur, Mom and Dad? If someone asked, you'd fumble and not know what to say. All you did was feed them nutritious food. Make sure they got their sleep. Motivate them off their duff, staring into electronic devices, to get outside and get some exercise. Now you bring them here because you desire for them a transformation more profound than skin deep.

Listen similarly to Acts 2.42, how attending to the basics daily across time yields miracles. It reads, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Luke penned these modest words after several lofty highs. Jesus had shockingly resurrected from the dead. The Holy Spirit had descended in a rush of wind and fire, galvanizing a ragged gang into formidable leaders. Peter went from awkward, inarticulate coward to robustly proclaiming God's truth in love. They couldn't stop him. The church added 3,000 folks that day, almost as many as our new member class.

But that was before. By today's verses, the fanfare subsides. Emotional highs are fleeting. We celebrate and move on. Peak experiences don't sustain daily life. We need sturdy habits. Here, as things unfold, initial marvels do not create anti-climax. Instead short-term high takes root in long-term commitment. That is where real transformation occurs. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." That sounds like returning to church after summer break. Where do sturdy habits form? Verse 46 says, "day by day...they spent much time together in the temple."

But let's break it down. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and preaching. In their attention, their lives got renarrated by the incomparable story of Jesus crucified and risen. There was no maudlin, mushy inclusiveness, like it's easy to love everybody. In the preaching and teaching they heard, they got straight on who they truly were in a

world forever wanting to co-opt them into something less. In all this preaching and teaching, they discovered what their faith is about so as not to get distracted by lesser things.

Preaching will never be as popular as, say, praise in music, especially on a day like today. But preaching is at least as important. And it is important for us preachers not to back off from the sturdy messages like Peter preached in the face of modern pressures merely to entertain or amuse. Garrison Keillor, from Lake Woebegone, observes: “I’ve heard a lot of sermons in the past ten years or so that make me want to get up and walk out. They’re secular, self-help sermons. Friendly, but of no use. They didn’t make you want to straight-en up. They didn’t give you anything hard. At some point and in some way, a sermon has to direct people to the death of Christ and to the campaign God has waged over the centuries to get our attention.” Ah, Garrison has a charming way of cutting to the chase.

Preaching creates an alternative reality where our lives get re-narrated by a love higher and holier than we could invent. Then our lives are transformed as the power of sacred mystery—mercy and compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation, redemption and hope—grasps us through practices and takes us to places we’d otherwise never visit. It matters more that we warm ourselves by the holy mysteries till we feel them changing everything in our life than that we grasp or understand them. Frankly, they’re too big for us to grasp.

Acts also reports how closely God’s people came together in fellowship. Maybe this is the most amazing miracle of Pentecost. That a people as diverse as “from every nation” (2.5) melded as one into a unified body of believers was nothing short of incredible. And it was a bond more powerful than warmed-up brother/sister love. Think of that in our day of isolated, hyper-individualized cubicles where we moderns live, feeling more lonely than free.

The love they held in common, we read, produced “signs and wonders,” (2.43) incredible fruits no one anticipated. One example was “all who believed were together and had all things in common.” They sold off unnecessary belongings, the stuff we put in self-storage. And they passed on the proceeds to the needy. Do you see what they were attempting? A community heaven-bent on banishing poverty. Can you imagine anything more spiritually brave than that? This verse isn’t about socialism or any “ism”, for that matter. It’s about faith overriding the social status quo, even upending sacred cows like personal property. To dare such lofty, impossible things, surely Spirit of the Lord was loosed among them.

Can you imagine us trying that today? Sinche, I am going to borrow your scooter at 4 pm today. Barker, I’m having a party, I need your 84 inch smoker on wheels. Gleason, I think I prefer your tennis racket to my own. I don’t think we are quite ready for that yet, do you?

Acts tell us that they also devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. Or, loosely interpreted for our purposes today, they gave themselves over to the grilling of hot dogs and the pulling of pork. Gathering together at tables is another personal, tangible sign of the work of God’s Spirit among us. Think of how often Gospel stories begin with, “Jesus was at table with them.” Then what follows is closeness, controversy, and then revelation.

Controversy because so often at table Jesus refused to observe social pecking orders his society so rigidly enforced to maintain a stale hierarchy of keeping everyone in their place.

Eating together—whether at this table, as we did last week—or at tables set up for us outside, makes a level playing field for the belovedness of everyone. As soon as we pray over any table to bless a meal that table becomes holy in its solidarity, unity and friendship. For these tables anticipate tables of heavenly banquets Jesus promised in his glory.

Also, Acts tell us the church devoted itself to prayer. I am not so sure that one takes much explaining. I mean, even atheists often believe in prayer, and turn to it as life takes its turns. They engaged in prayer on a regular basis. Prayers for each other. Prayers for the world. Not unlike our joys and concerns. Not unlike our Care Circle as prayer warriors.

It is not just our children who have transformed over the summer I promise you, doing things as simple and accessible as these across time transform us. I have seen FCC, D transform since I have known you. Yes, we like our big celebrations like Welcome Back Sunday. But so much of it is practicing together daily what we rehearse here on Sundays.

We come here to hear a story retold, we reframe it in our own stories, we are given a new world and our lives are forever changed. It's going to be a great year. Let's celebrate that. Amen.