

BECOMING A NEW CREATION

Psalm 51:10-12

2 Corinthians 5:17

I Corinthians 13:11-13

Kelly Boyte Brill

Avon Lake UCC

13 June 2021

Throughout the Bible, God asks people to change. Abram becomes Abraham. He's told to abandon his home and travel to an unknown destination. God gives Abraham promises too wild to be believed. God wants Abraham to leave his comfort zones.

God tells Moses he can no longer live the quiet, shepherding life. This man who has a fear of public speaking is told to become the leader of his people. Imagine receiving an assignment like this. God says to Moses, "Go to the Pharaoh, the one who has held your people captive for decades, and tell him it's time for your liberation. Then lead your people towards the promised land. It's a job that will take 40 years."

God asks people to change, to move, to grow.

And when we use the word "ask," well, that may not be the right word. God doesn't take "no" for an answer, at least not in the stories we have in the Bible. Maybe there were other young women whom God asked to be the mother of Jesus, but the only story we know is the story of Mary, the woman who said "yes", knowing it would cost her. It would hurt her reputation, her relationship with Joseph.

And we don't know either how long God might have been trying to get Saul's attention. Saul was so zealous, so busy, so energetic as a persecutor of the Christians he wouldn't have noticed God nudging him, whispering in his ear. What we **do** know is that one day God commands his attention, strikes him blind for three days, and says to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul becomes Paul, and turns all of that enthusiasm around...instead of destroying the church, he builds it up.

Throughout the Bible, God asks people to change, **compels** people to change, to leave their comfort zones.

We were created to be people who change. Yet change is SO hard for most of us. We drag our feet, we try to talk God out of it, we resist it. Maybe that's why the Bible also says, hundreds of times, "Do not be afraid." Why are we so afraid of change if the change is coming from God? If God is with us, who can be against us? If God is already **in** the future, pulling us towards the future, pulling us towards the divine being itself, why are we so afraid? So over and over, God says to God's people, "Do not be afraid; I am with you." God isn't only in the past, even though the language of nostalgia would lead us to think that that's where God lives. God is surely in this present moment, and spiritual practice helps us to be more aware of it. But God is also in the future, gently opening the door for us, ushering us in, encouraging us to keep moving forward, towards progress, towards growth, towards transformation.

One author suggests that we consider a four-step process of personal transformation. I believe his steps are right in sync with our biblical passages for today.

The four steps are:

Cleaning Up

Growing Up

Waking Up

Showing Up.

Psalm 51 says, "Create in me a **clean heart**, O God; put a new and right spirit within me." It speaks to the desire I'm assuming most of us can relate to - I know I can...the desire to be renewed.

Over the past year, I baptized several children in private ceremonies. When I have that opportunity, gathering with a small group around the baptismal font, I talk about the symbolism of baptism, and the rich imagery of water. Water is essential for life, it refreshes, it cleanses. When we renew our baptismal vows, when we remember our baptism by touching the water in our font, we are experiencing, each time, the meaning of baptism, our mark of identity in the church. We hear God saying to us the words Jesus heard after his own baptism: "You are my beloved child; in you I am well-pleased."

Cleaning up is the first step towards personal transformation. It involves taking stock of where we are, looking at ourselves honestly - both lovingly and with humility - and deciding what parts of our lives need to change, listening to what God is saying to us, where God is nudging us to go, what God is calling us to be.

I want to issue two cautions about this first stage. It's where a lot of people get stuck. It's where a lot of religious people, especially, get stuck. When you hear the words, "Cleaning Up," you might think of phrases like, "Clean up your act" or "good clean living." "Clean up," give up your bad habits, stop sinning, follow a rigid set of rules, obey the do's and don'ts. This approach was depicted so well in the movie, "Footloose" about a fundamentalist preacher in a small southern town who banned dancing. Some religious people stop their growth at this stage. Follow the rules, and you're done.

So we remember that this is the **first** stage. We begin with an honest assessment of our lives and we choose to make some healthy changes, but we don't end by censoring ourselves or others.

The second caution about this idea of "cleaning yourself up" is that it tends to be negative and can easily lead to feelings of shame and guilt. Remember the words Jesus hears at his baptism. He doesn't hear, "You are a terrible person. Go spend forty days in

the wilderness repenting and changing.” He doesn’t hear, “Be careful. There’s a world of temptation out there with danger at every turn.” No, he hears, “You are my beloved child. In you I am well-pleased. I’m going to prepare and equip you to live in a world where temptations exist.” Any lasting change begins not from a place of shame but from a place of self-compassion, remembering the kind of abundant life God wants for each of us.

The second stage of transformation is “Growing Up.” Paul writes about this so eloquently in I Corinthians 13, a passage we will be reading again next week. “When I was a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” We are children of God, we think of God as a parent who loves us unconditionally and wants the best for us. But not even the most sentimental parent wants his children to stay little forever. Parents want their children to become mature adults with full lives of their own, and that’s what God wants for us as well. We can depend on God but it is a healthy interdependence. God needs and wants us to be partners in creating a more just and peaceful world. And here’s the warning in this second stage of transformation: growing up doesn’t mean we have to lose our sense of fun and play, delight and joy. Remember Jesus also says, “Unless you become like little children, you will not experience the fullness of God’s realm.” Don’t become childish but definitely **do** maintain your childlike approach to life.

It’s when we reach the 3rd and 4th stages of transformation that life gets really interesting and challenging. Stage 3 is “Waking Up.”

Our passage from 2 Corinthians reads, “If anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away and look, new things have arrived!” God is constantly refreshing us and our world but we often miss it because we aren’t looking, we aren’t paying attention. I had this Mary Oliver quote framed and it’s hung over

my desk at home to remind myself to pay attention and be astonished by the beauty of the world. (Instructions for Living a Life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.) When we're awake, we're noticing the world around us, we're really aware of the people around us. Waking up leads to both gratitude and empathy.

I had the wonderful gift of spending three days in Chicago this past week with my son and daughter - a rare opportunity for the three of us. One day we were able to do a few of our favorite things including finding the best tacos and an excellent bookstore - they're both in the same neighborhood, a formerly Eastern European neighborhood on the south side called Pilsen. It's now a largely Hispanic neighborhood, and my son Michael used to live there. After our taco lunch, we walked to the bookstore. He said, "Mom, this bookstore has changed owners since the last time we were there. It's now a co-op. I'm curious to see what they're going to be able to do for the neighborhood now." It's a lovely place still, a place I could easily spend hours and hundreds of dollars (speaking of temptation). I found a few books, of course, and after we left and continued our walk through the neighborhood, Michael said to us, "Well, they have a good selection of books, and I hope they make it, but I didn't see a single book in Spanish." He is obviously more observant than I am. Think about it. You're trying to make a positive impact on a Spanish-speaking neighborhood, and you don't have any books in Spanish, nothing to signal to the majority of the people who live in the neighborhood that this is a place for them. I think Michael is onto something. When we are truly aware of our surroundings, the place and the people around us, we will live with empathy. When we both grow up and wake up, we are able to see the world from someone else's point of view. We develop a deep sense of community, knowing that we will not thrive until all people thrive.

The final stage of transformation is when we show up. We don't just give lip service to the values we profess. We take risks for the sake of a greater good. We make sacrifices because we're listening to a higher calling. We know that our own comfort and pleasure is far less satisfying than a life of service to others.

Think of the 70-some youth and adults who spent all last week serving others through our senior high youth ministry program. They cleaned up the beach, landscaped church members' yards, painted walls at St. Paul's church, organized supplies at the Haven Center homeless shelter - you'll hear all the details on our Mission Trip Sunday in July. They showed up. Some of the adults spent a week of their vacation time showing up.

Have you heard the remarkable story of 17-year-old Verda Tetteh from Massachusetts? She was awarded a \$40,000 college scholarship at her high school graduation ceremony on June 4. A few minutes after she received it, she walked up to the podium, politely interrupted the ceremony and said, "I need to return this. I want someone to have it who needs it more than I do."

Age doesn't necessarily determine spiritual maturity. Verda shows maturity beyond her years; in fact, she is a person who has achieved the highest level of personal transformation - she showed up in a truly inspirational way, demonstrating through her words and her actions that she knows what it means to experience gratitude, empathy and risk-taking. Her life is just beginning but it is already full.

I don't believe there is any phrase in the entire Bible that gives me more of a sense of personal hope than these words, "If anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!" God does not want us to remain stuck in unhealthy habits, in ways of thinking and living that prevent

us from experiencing abundant life. Change isn't easy, but it's always possible, at every age. God created us to be people who change, who grow, who experience transformation. If we're not growing and changing, we're dying. It's true of people, it's true of relationships, it's true of institutions and organizations. God is already in the future, so let us walk towards that future, full of hope and courage.

Let us pray. Help us, God, to be open to the transformation you have in mind for each of us, so that we can grow in every way into the people you need and want us to be, people fully aware and alive, with hearts that are grateful and empathetic. We pray in the name of Jesus who is our example and friend. Amen.