Be Transformed – Luke 4:14-30

Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly, Albuquerque NM

03 May 2019

Beloved in Christ: grace, mercy and peace be with you from our God who is love, and from Jesus who is our light and our life.

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul writes this: ***Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds …***

Be transformed … As a Lutheran Christian, as a pastor and bishop of our church, I have to admit that the language of transformation doesn’t come naturally. Not that there’s anything wrong with transformation, or metamorphosis as the Greek New Testament terms it. After all, who doesn’t love a good caterpillar to butterfly story? Who doesn’t appreciate that dramatic tale of faith transformation: I once was lost but now I’m found, condemned but now forgiven, was doomed but now I’m saved.

The only problem is that in our good both/and Lutheran way of understanding the Christian life, we’re rather suspicious of the whole one direction transformation paradigm. We’re the Christians who say, “You know, I’m pretty sure there’s still a caterpillar somewhere in that butterfly. We ARE simultaneously sinner and saint, you know, not one or the other.” If we had buttons on the Christian life, they might say, “Leery of Transformation”.

And yet we know transformation happens. Metamorphosis occurs. We’ve seen it, we’ve heard about it, we may well have experienced it. So, how do we reconcile our both-and, sinner-saint understanding of the Christian life with what we know to be true: that things can and do change for the better? Good thing we love paradox!

Our readings for this worship point us to some helpful imagery for understanding transformation Lutheran style. In our lesson from Exodus and then Second Corinthians we encounter this concept of the veil. In Exodus, Moses uses a veil over his face after his encounter with God gives him such a holy-glow that others were intimidated. The text indicates that whenever he spoke with God or when Moses was speaking God’s word to the people, the veil was off. But all the other times, the veil was in place, hiding the God-shine that reflected in Moses’ own face.

Paul picks up on this imagery of the veil in Second Corinthians when he describes how the minds of the faithful are hardened: a veil lies over their minds, he says – they are cut off from the transforming light of God even when it’s right in front of them. But when that veil is lifted, when the hardened mind turns towards Christ, then everything changes. The Spirit of the Lord brings freedom, a metamorphosis that allows us to see what really IS rather than what we imagine things to be.

What I appreciate about this veil imagery with respect to transformation is that the veil itself doesn’t necessarily come up and stay off. True, when it’s lifted there’s this transformational moment of insight … but when it descends again, and it does, we’re cut off from the truth, unable to recognize what we just witnessed a moment before. That’s when the mind hardens again – reverts to its fixed and limited version of reality.

I don’t know about you, but this certainly resonates with my experience of the Christian life. If it’s true that our baptismal journey is a daily dying to self and rising with Christ, then transformation Lutheran style can best be understood not as a once and done movement in the right direction, but as repeated experiences of sudden insight that provides a holy interruption to our life under the veil.

Paul is explicit about connecting the mind with transformation. A veiled mind is one that is hardened or entrenched. A renewed mind is one that is transformed.

It took me a while, but when I came to understand the connection between my mind and what it means to be in bondage to sin, it was a game changer. Turns out that my mind – also knowns as my ego, or what Paul calls the old Adam or life in the flesh – this mind of mine loves to be in control and in effect, holds me captive by the way it frames my life, the world, God! When my mind is in control, there is a veil that keeps me from seeing and experiencing the way things really are in favor of a portrait that I create for myself. Ring true?

It was from Father Richard Rohr, our keynote at this year’s Assembly, that I first learned the term “dualistic mind” - which helps me understand just how it is that my mind keeps me captive. The dualistic mind refers to our mind’s inherent need to assess everything on the basis of either-or, this-that, right-wrong, with me-against me, of God-not of God. This incessant addiction of our minds to label things, categorize them, judge them is how we seek to control our reality. When I can put my experiences or other people into a category, name them as good or bad, source of pain or pleasure, I create a self-designed portrait of “what is” which means I don’t have to deal with the ambiguity of simply opening myself to God’s faithful present with me at every moment, in every situation, regardless of how I may be tempted to label it.

This understanding of how my mind keeps me captive offers a whole new perspective on the story of Adam and Eve and that tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There’s a reason God says, “Don’t go there, friends!” When my little human mind gets hold of categories like good and evil, suddenly I use them to define reality on my terms rather than trusting that God’s gracious embrace really does holds me and this world amid all the changes and chances of life. Turns about that dualistic thinking is very handy if you want to be your own god …

To be transformed by the renewing of your mind happens when your veil is lifted, when you suddenly recognize the limitations of your self-imposed frameworks and experience the life-changing truth that our companions in Madagascar sing about every Sunday in their liturgy: fa tsy mba misy fetra ny fitiavany … for there is no limit to God’s love. There is NO limit to God’s love. Nothing can restrict the cross-shaped love of God: not your categories or labels or division of things into good and evil. To rise daily with Christ is to have that veil lifted, to be drawn by the Spirit into the fullness of who God actually is …

There is such liberation, such hope, such promise in that moment of transformation, in that lifting of the veil! And yet our minds are tenacious: they will look for every opportunity to draw us back into the safety of what we can name and control, even when it makes us miserable. Such is the both/and life of sinner and saint, transformed and yet still captive …

This both/and dynamic of the human condition is brought to life in our gospel reading. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth. He’s in his hometown, these folks know him. They have a category in their minds about who this Jesus is, no doubt informed by their experience of him as a kid that used to play with Joseph’s carpentry tools or run around in mud puddles! In their minds, they know him.

And then as Jesus speaks, reading just the right word from the Scriptures at the right moment, as he proclaims that this promise from Isaiah is being fulfilled here, now, in their very midst – a veil is lifted from their minds. Transformed, they are amazed by the gracious words of Jesus – they ask themselves: isn’t this Joseph’s son? How is it that HE is suddenly a vessel of God’s truth? Hardened minds renewed!

Make no mistake: that moment of metamorphosis is real, and yet it doesn’t last. As Jesus digs deeper with them, as he reveals truth about their own hearts and preconceived ideas, the veil descends as they are hijacked by their own defensiveness. Suddenly their amazement turns to rage. Those who praised Jesus suddenly want to destroy him.

We don’t hear the end of the story for these hometown folks, but one can imagine that some, perhaps many, were graced when additional moments of transformation, when the veil lifted again, their minds were renewed. Perhaps it came with the news of a cross and an empty tomb or perhaps by the breathless testimony of some travelers to Emmaus whose own eyes were opened to recognize living Christ in the breaking of the bread. It is reassuring to me to imagine these mind-hardened folks at the synagogue that day as fellow sinner-saint disciples of the One whose Spirit renews our minds.

Be transformed by the renewing of your minds … what good news that far from being once and done, true transformation is a repeatable metamorphosis that happens every time we die to self, to our own veiled visions of “what is” and rise to see with the eyes and heart of Christ.

One of those consistent places where the veil is lifted, where we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, is at the Table whenever and wherever we gather. There as we gather with bread and cup we don’t get to be in control – we can’t be. We are simply come with our open hands and our need to be filled by the very presence of Christ himself. There at the Table there is no pretending that we’ve got it all figured out, no capacity to hide from the gift and fragility that is life, no escape into our self-constructed framework. There in a meal that is for you, there is only a love that is tsy mba misy fetra – without limits. There in bread and cup there is only a Lord who meets you in your good and your evil, with all your constructs, in all vulnerability to forgive, renew, transform.

So, beloved: do not hesitate wherever the Table may be set; do not hesitate to come and be transformed yet again. Let the veil be lifted, even for a moment. And be assured that nothing your mind tells you can ever change what actually IS, can ever limit the love of God that is yours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanks be to God

**AMEN**