

I. Introduction

A. I consider myself an optimistic cynic (or maybe it's a cynical optimist?) If that sounds like a contradiction in terms to you ... welcome to my world.

1. On one hand, when it comes to individual people I meet I usually give them the benefit of the doubt.

a) I like to believe people mean well and they will do what they say.

b) I've been described as gullible when I've believed someone's story at face value and then been taken advantage of.

2. On the other hand, when it comes to governments, corporations and institutions, I have a cynical streak.

a) I have never seen for myself any state or national government that was truly an instrument of God.

b) I don't allow myself to 100% jump on any politician's or party's bandwagon because of the very fallen nature of human political systems.

c) I tend to see greed, abuse of power & racism most alive and active in the structures of societies. And sadly that often includes organized religion.

B. So I had a hard time preparing for this sermon, especially with its key word: Transformation.

1. I have mixed feelings about that word

2. If I had had a sermon title before the bulletin printed, it would have been something like "The Optimistic Cynic"

II. (laying it out straight) **Why am I cynical about the word "transformation"? Why not?**

A. Who am I kidding, to preach about transformation here?

1. Look around:

a) Look at this nice building, with a comfy heated & air-conditioned sanctuary, filled with a bunch of clean, attractive, nicely dressed people who almost all managed to get here on time

b) Walk around the parking lot: There are some very sharp vehicles out there and hardly any junky rustbuckets (that is if you ignore my old truck!)

c) Here I am, speaking in a church that has a lot of resources, with people generous enough to support four pastors and about \$800K of annual ministries!

2. At first glance, it would appear that we don't need anything!

a) In fact, we prefer not needing anything, and we certainly don't want to be seen as "needy" ourselves!

b) So as I said, I struggled to bring a sermon on "Experiencing Transformation" ...

(1) or at least to bring a sermon that sounded pious & churchy, divorced from our contradictory realities

(2) I resisted bringing a message that just reminds us of how great is the Good News of Jesus ... (for others) ...

(3) A message about the gospel that transforms other people ... needy people ... messed up people

B. If we're brutally honest, **on an average Sunday in this country, the people filling most churches do not come desiring transformation right then and there.**

1. On Sunday mornings people come to church for many reasons:

a) Some of us come because we need comfort or encouragement

b) Some of us come because we're confused

c) Some of us are just hoping to connect with God somehow.

d) Some of us come because we have to!

e) Some of us are interested in a mild challenge in our Christian walk, or we want to get some "food for thought"

f) And some of us honestly just want to be entertained!

2. I've spent over a half-century of Sunday mornings in churches (whether sitting like you out there, or leading or preaching up here)

a) In my experience, not many of us were truly seeking transformation when we walked in the doors today

b) If you came to WMC this morning earnestly hoping to be transformed please come tell me about it. I'd love to be proven wrong!

C. The fact is that when we live with our painted-on cheery dispositions ... the front we present that all is well ... our cocoon of comfort, complacency and privilege ... **all these things tend to work against transformation**

1. These outwardly positive worlds of ours can make us less open to change ... less flexible for God to do something new ... and less receptive to the transformation the Holy Spirit may want to bring us!

2. As this Journey Forward series has declared, God certainly wants a healthy church that is centered on Jesus, witnessing to God's peace, and experiencing transformation through the HS!

3. Could it be that in our material comforts ... in the way we insure ourselves against almost any underwritable risk ... in our impressive educational levels, we are actually inoculating ourselves against transformation?

a) I wonder if we have succeeded in creating church systems and cultures that are so comfortable, so stable, so satisfying for OUR needs, that we resist any call from God that would change the status quo ...

b) If we're honest, many of us (like me) give lip service to nice words like transformation, but we actually prefer things as they are, thank you very much!

c) Much of the time in church, we feel no need for God to transform us!

III. I wonder if, like me, Nicodemus from our reading in John 3, might have been an optimistic cynic ...

A. I think Nicodemus felt no big need to be transformed

1. Look at the perplexed answer he gave to Jesus about this notion of being born again

2. We also notice that this Pharisee, this member of the Jewish ruling council, came to Jesus by night.

a) He had too much to lose to be seen by lots of people talking with this troublemaking small-town rabbi.

b) Fear of losing power or prestige is one of the biggest obstacles to transformation. So against that fear, we often protect ourselves with cynicism.

B. But despite his cynical, cautious treatment of Jesus, Nicodemus also saw something in Jesus that drew him in

1. The mere fact that he sought out conversation with Jesus shows a side of him that didn't quite believe all the suspicion and criticism he heard in the Sanhedrin chambers about this Jesus from Nazareth. Nicodemus had to check it out for himself.

2. We also see the optimist side of Nicodemus in the flattering conversation starter he brings to Jesus (*repeat v2*). Nicodemus does not start by putting Jesus on the defensive.

C. What's your gut-level personal response to this word "transformation"?

1. Are you more of a cynic, or an optimist?
2. The more I thought about Nicodemus, Jesus and transformation this week, the more I considered that my own cynicism might be an overreaction

IV. What if Jesus did not transform you or me overnight, or even in just a few dramatic days at a camp or a conference?

A. What if spiritual transformations happen for some people more slowly, more gradually? Not every transformation is a dramatic 180° turnaround from greed to grace ...

B. In concluding this series, I suggest we think about this word "transformation" in three ways:

1. Transformation is not always quick or sudden

- a) We Westerners are impatient people, and the information age we live in has made that even worse, so that we expect immediate responses, instant answers and quick solutions to problems
- b) We may not actually oppose transformation by God ... as long as it's quick and painless. But God is not limited by either of those conditions
- c) There is a favorite quote of mine about patience, from the 20th C French scientist & priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Here's an excerpt :

Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are, quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. ... We are impatient at being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability and that it may take a very long time.

And so it is with you. ... Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

--Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

2. Transformation may be partial or in stages

- a) The Teilhard de Chardin quote not only urges us to be patient with how God transforms us, but to expect it to happen in stages
- b) God's transformation in us is seldom a total makeover. People can usually tell that something is different, but we are still recognizable as ourselves.

(1) So don't lose heart if you pray for a big transformation regarding a bad habit you have or with your anger problem, but then, even with regular prayer, and counseling and support of your loved ones, improvement only comes some of the time

(2) Just because change in us is gradual, and we're not suddenly

better overnight, doesn't mean the Holy Spirit is not working in us.

c) But this is why we need each other in Christian community.

(1) Sometimes the transformations God does in us are so gradual that we ourselves don't see them.

(2) We need others to notice and tell us something like, "You know in the last year I've noticed you're more patient with your kids and you don't lose your cool as often."

3. Transformation may come from changes/events that most people would NOT call positive or for the better

a) Friday night several of us were here at Waterford for a special dinner for Anabaptist Disabilities Network, and the guest speaker was our own JE Misz, speaking about "Finding God in Mental Illness"

(1) He really blessed me with the reminder that, far from being a curse and a stigma, sometimes the struggles people have with mental illness can actually be a gift to them and others around them

(2) Sometimes the best ministers of Christ are the ones who the world considers handicapped, disadvantaged, or who have "health challenges"

b) I have seen the true characteristics and teachings of Jesus shine through various persons who live with chronic physical and mental conditions, mobility limitations, Down's Syndrome, addictions and more

c) In a minute way (which I hesitate to even mention because other people's examples are so much better), hearing JE made me recall the effect that my past episodes with depression have had on me.

d) I believe that experiencing minor depression also worked a minor transformation in me:

(1) Made me less judgmental of people who have very low energy

(2) Raised my empathy for others experiencing depression, especially that they don't just "snap out of it" if they want

(3) And it challenged me to see that people are not to be defined by any diagnosis they may carry

C. God does not promise that transformation through Jesus will cure our diseases, undo our trauma, or remove our addictions

1. What's more likely to be transformed is our own response to adversity

a) God may alter our instinctive response in hard times from just trying to dig ourselves out of the situation, to seeking God's strength and direction early on instead

b) Transformation may mean we have reduced anxiety as our being grounded in God's loving care for us brings some glimpses of the "peace that passes all understanding"

2. This kind of transformation is what I noticed this past week in a routine monthly email that pastors in Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference receive from our Conference Pastor Dan Miller

a) Dan in his email was reflecting on a vision of what he called "deep change" that he believes God is already doing and wants to do more of in pastors' lives and in our churches.

b) Dan didn't use the word "transformation" in the email, but I invite you to listen to what I believe is the same thing:

"... along the way we want to grow more large-hearted, more trusting, more generous, more integrated, more able to hold tensions. That's what I mean by deep change. (Dan goes on ...)

Deep change might not change the activities I do; or it might. Deep change might not make me more efficient; or it might. I'm not sure, but it seems [those] actions named above [being more large-hearted, more trusting, more generous, more integrated, more able to hold tensions] help us develop a more honest assessment. We become more able to hold the good, the bad and the ugly about ourselves and others."

Dan Miller, from email "October greeting to pastors in Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference" (Oct. 1, 2019)

V. Conclusion

A. In our 2nd Scripture today, we heard the familiar account of Jesus for the 1st time instituting what we call The Lord's Supper



1. There's a lot of transformation going on in this story, not least of which is Jesus transforming the traditional Jewish feast of the Passover into a radically new ritual meal for his disciples

2. In the Anabaptist tradition, we view the value of the Lord's Supper as more symbolic than sacramental.

- a) We don't believe the bread and the juice somehow mysteriously become literal physical body and blood of Jesus
- b) But that doesn't mean taking these elements in this holy meal doesn't affect us

B. What happens here at the Lord's Table is spiritual fortification that we receive from Jesus himself

1. This is an ongoing expression of Jesus' incredible self-giving love for us

- a) The Lord's Table represents an embodiment of that love, taking it deeper than just love as a concept or an emotion.
- b) As Jesus himself said, this bread and cup are a reminder of the forgiveness of our sins

2. And this forgiveness makes possible the ultimate transformation for each of us:

From being a sinful self-centered ruler over a kingdom called "Me" ... to being a love-oriented Jesus-centered disciple in God's global realm of peace and wholeness

C. In this meal I invite you to come celebrate the sometimes dramatic and sometimes very slow work of transformation God is doing in your life. Come open yourself to letting Jesus through his Spirit transform you even more into His image. Amen