

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 24, 2014
Barrhaven United Church of Canada

Romans 11:2: 1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

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Metamorphoses

You know when you are invited to a gathering of people you don't know well - one of those parties where being good at small talk is an asset - chit chat about the weather, vacations, illness or surgeries (why I don't know) - and eventually, the question comes around to 'what do you do?' Telling folks you are minister can elicit some interesting responses. Sometimes, people need to unload all their negative feelings about the church, inclusive language, ordination, that irrelevant book called the Bible, church organization - or worse, their current minister - anything and everything.

Most often I hear that someone went to church in the past but now church is irrelevant, meaningless, childish. They've outgrown it and so should everyone else! The most fun though is people who, on hearing I'm a minister, immediately tell me they don't believe in God.

That, I think, is supposed to stop the conversation. But I like to see what happens when I respond with: "Tell me about the God you don't believe in - perhaps I don't believe in that God either." That last question can sometimes lead to deep, and deeply interesting, spiritual questions and conversations about the nature of reality and the meaning of existence.

That was the kind of conversation Jesus was having with Peter: Who do you say that I am? is a little like asking if you believe in God. Peter gives the customary responses - Moses and Elijah - two founders of the Jewish faith. And we know he's being complimentary in his answer, because we have other passages in Matthew where it is clear that some people, and some among the religious authorities, thought Jesus was something akin to a demon who worked miracles with the aid of the dark side. Wisely, Peter doesn't mention those possibilities.

But Jesus is not satisfied with 'some people say,' the polite, safe answer. He wants to know what Peter really thinks. Peter responds with that famous statement: "You are the Anointed, the son of the living God!" Peter has been hanging out with Jesus for some time now, and in a moment of divine revelation, inspiration, a moment of clarity and insight, he realizes just who this friend of his is.

This statement is a confession of faith. With it, Peter becomes a founding member of the Way of Christ. His perspective shifts - from what Jesus does for him - to what Jesus can do for others. He becomes a committed follower and interpreter of Jesus' words and

life. His moment of insight founds a church. He turns an itinerant preacher into a founder of a faith.

This passage in Romans contains Paul's clearest statement about the fourth spiritual path of the Christian church year. Remember those? *Via positiva, negativa, creativa* and now the *via transformativa*. The fourth path is the longest - stretching from Pentecost in June to Reign of Christ Sunday in November- it is the way of transformation. Paul clearly states what the task of this path is: to be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Now in Greek, the word Paul uses is *metamorphosen* - metamorphosis. So the change, the transformation he is speaking about is akin to that of the caterpillar becoming a butterfly. That change, that transformation, is what the Christian spiritual life is all about. Pretty dramatic. It's nothing less than becoming a window, like Jesus was a window, into the nature of God - a nature which is unbounded love, creativity and beauty. That is the metamorphosis we are to undergo. That is the point of spiritual practice: of worship, prayer, study. It prepares us to become for others what Jesus was for Peter - a window into the very nature and desires of God. It takes a lifetime.

In this, the season of the *via transformativa*, we pay particular attention to it. For Paul, the path of Christ offered an alternative to the negative, god-less conformity of mind and spiritual blindness that was life under Rome. Instead of the Pax Romana - the peace of Rome brought at the point of the sword and unity enforced through deportation, occupation and starvation - the peace of Christ offered creativity, novelty and a harmony capable of containing both difference and contrast.

For us, the ideas and assumptions that oppress us are harder to see and to name. We live with them everyday, they operate in every aspect of our lives. They permeate everything and they become invisible. They have many names - scientific materialism, consumerism, globalism, substantialism or simple empiricism, essentialism to name a few. Names that don't even come up much in everyday conversation. Nevertheless, Paul challenges us to renew our minds and create a metamorphoses in ourselves and our world by bringing our minds and hearts into harmony with the mind and heart of God through naming and changing these assumptions about reality and habits of mind.

Metamorphosis. A tall order. How do we do it? Through meditating on the Christ, on Peter's confession, on the commonwealth of God, renewing of mind occurs - and through it, our-self is changed and then that change permeates the world.

Paul invites us, as we travel the *via transformativa*, to shake off the idea that God no longer acts in the world. Paul calls us to renew our minds by keeping before us the vision of a different reality - the vision of Peter's insight into the realm of God, the realm

of the spirit. That was a transcendent moment and an encounter with the transcendent is a moment of resurrection.

Every time we make that confession or one like it, we affirm the ground of our faith. We commit ourselves to work to create occasions of transcendence for others. We commit ourselves again to what practicing our faith - our spiritual practice - can do for others and for the world. We affirm that God is continually luring all creation to life and abundance. And God continually lures us to work to conform our minds to that vision in order to become a window into God's boundless love and compassion for others. Amen.

c. 2014, Rev. Suzanne E. Sykes