

Whose Transformation?

Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Whitefish UMC

August 21, 2011

- ✦ This week a friend and neighbor called and asked if we could have coffee. I love meeting with this older friend on any occasion, but this time, my friend's voice contained a sense of urgency. Turns out there was reason to worry about an adult son, depressed and discouraged, who had announced to his parents that he didn't believe in anything anymore. As we sat together, my friend, a life-long Lutheran and I, this story from Garrison Keillor's repertoire came to mind.
- ✦ It begins with these words from the scripture that Jim just read: "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." Keillor writes: These are the words on the cake baked in honor of Lois Tolerud's confirmation, (another word for her officially joining the church) at Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church in Keillor's beautiful story, *Aprille*. The next line draws you in: "It was a large cake, and Marilyn Tolerud used the extra-fine nozzle on the frosting gun—there it sat, lit with birthday candles, and Lois didn't know how to tell them that she wasn't sure that she believed in God. She was pretty sure that she might've lost her faith."
- ✦ "Lost her faith." It's a phrase we hear often. We use it to describe what happens to those we love, and sometimes to us, if we are honest.
- ✦ Garrison writes: "She thought she might've lost it on Friday night or sometime Saturday morning, she wasn't sure. She didn't mention it at

that time because she thought she might get it back.” So says Lois in the story, a girl described by Keillor as “a tall, lanky girl who has grown four inches this year, and it has tired her out. She is quieter than she used to be, a tall shy girl with long brown hair she has learned to tie in an elegant bun, and creamy skin that she keeps beautiful by frequent blushing, which is good for the circulation and makes her lovelier whenever she is admired.”

- ✦ Lois is admired by a boy in her geometry class who has just written her a twenty-seven page letter telling her that God has written their names together in the Book of Love. But that is not what has caused her to think she has lost her faith. Instead, as she babysits for her younger brothers and sisters while her parents go over to have supper with her prayer parents (people in the congregation who have been asked to pray for her during her confirmation class), she considers that she began to lose her faith when she learned who her prayer parents were. Lois’s prayer parents turned out to be the Val Tollefsons, people she had never liked. “To think that every night over supper Val Tollefson had bowed his big thick head and said, “And Lord, we ask Thee to strengthen Lois in her faith”—the same man who once said, “You won’t amount to a hill of beans, you don’t have the sense that God gave geese.” She could feel her faith slip a little [each time she thought of them praying for her].” But what really did it was when she turned on the TV and lost her faith. Men in khaki suits were beating people senseless, shooting them with machine guns, throwing the bodies out of helicopters. She thought to herself, “this could happen here.” “She prayed and heard something like an echo, as if the prayer was only in her head. The whole world was in control of

- dark powers, working senseless evils on our lives, and prayer went no place, prayer just went up the chimney like smoke.”
- ✦ Of course Garrison Keillor does not leave Lois there, in the midst of cynicism and doubt. But sometimes we feel as if we have been left there, sometimes for a long time. We feel as if we have lost our faith. Or we wonder how people can cope with life without HAVING faith. Without it, we are stuck with being, as the Apostle Paul warns, conformed to this world, a world that is often dark, sinful, and full of despair.
 - ✦ In many ways, both Paul’s exhortation to the diverse Roman church and Matthew’s gospel reading for today involve the concept of self—both for Jesus and for us. In our North American society, the self is elevated above all else.
 - ✦ How often have you heard the saying, “*Just be yourself.*” Although I think there is value in this statement, sometimes it makes me want to scream “*Which self?*”
 - ✦ Scientists have discovered what we all know intuitively if we engage in any form of self-examination—that our selves are made up of a committee of many members—maybe an angry self, a generous self, a stubborn self, a loving self, a forgiving self, a cynical self...the list goes on. Imagine all the selves that are competing in your brain, in your soul, in your self. *Take a few seconds to jot down on your bulletin the selves that are competing in you these days.....*
 - ✦ “Who do you say that I am?” asks Jesus to Peter. Peter and the disciples knew Jesus as many things...as a healer, a teacher, a priest, a liberator, a prophet, a friend, a leader, a brother, a companion, even a

- waiter. But Peter, who often doesn't get things right, hits the jackpot with his answer: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."
- ✦ So it is this self that Jesus wants his followers to know—the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, revealed by God's very own self.
 - ✦ But the paradox is, this Messiah who everyone expected to be a great warrior king of noble birth and stature, turned out to be a Jewish carpenter's Son, who was born, lived briefly, died violently in his thirties, and rose from the dead unexpectedly. Those who knew him, who stood face-to-face with him, thought either "this is God incarnate" or "This man is nuts."
 - ✦ But because of Easter, we believe that God vindicated all that Jesus was, known to us in his acts of compassion, inclusion, forgiveness, healing, and liberation—of finding the lost, forgiving enemies, loving the unlovable. We believe, then, that this is what God wants for us, the followers of Jesus, to be, too.
 - ✦ This is the self—the loving, healing, inclusive, forgiving, liberating, challenging, and accepting self--that God wants us to be. But how do we do it? How are we to be transformed, as Paul says we ought to be? And what does this transformation look like?
 - ✦ For a long time, this passage has intrigued me—it's been a touchstone of sorts for me. I have longed for the transformation, the renewing of my mind, the discerning of the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God for my life and for the world. I have always thought that if **I** only HAD enough faith, that transformation would happen.
 - ✦ Awhile ago I had an epiphany of sorts. It has come about through reading wonderful stories and novels, and through sitting with you through the rhythms of your life. I had just finished reading Anne

Tyler's book, *Back When We Were Grownups*. It's the story of a woman, who at 53 wakes up and wonders how she ever ended up being the person she is. She is so different than the self she thought she would be when she was in college. Instead of being a respected teacher of college history as she planned, she is the owner and hostess of a home, "The Open Arms" that is rented out for parties. She is mother and grandmother to a dysfunctional family of children and grandchildren that might as well be from another planet. Through twists of fate, she is able to revisit the self she thought she ought to have been. She is, in essence, given the chance to go back to be who she wanted to be. Yet by the grace of God, she is given the vision to see that the self she has become is in fact much more generous, healing, accepting, and loving than the person she might have become. By opening herself to the will of God, she has become transformed—an amazing and wonderful person, living into God's dream for her.

- ✦ You see, I think the secret to transformation is not HAVING faith, but living it. It focuses more on God than on us. It's not something we earn by doing the right things. It is living in an attitude of trust in God, trusting that God is present in every situation in life, and that God's love is there for us, whether or not we deserve it or have earned it. And trusting that the same is true for others, too.
- ✦ For the truth is, that you are not the one who will bring about transformation in your life. You can choose to be conformed to the world—to trust in the world's cynicism, the world's despair, the world's judgment, the world's success. But if you open your self to

God, if you trust God, if you live in faith, GOD will take care of the transformation.

- ✦ One of our problems is that we try to reorganize God out of a job. Paul knew this. He admonishes, in the rest of today's passage, "don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but think according to the faith you live...for as in one body, we are many members, and not all members have the same function.
- ✦ Remember Lois Tolerud, the confirmand in Garrison Keillor's story who was afraid she had lost her faith? I promised you that she wouldn't be left there, and neither are we. Through a funny series of events, Lois discovers that she and all of the other odd characters in her life are being drawn by God to be brave, forgiving, loving, and accepting of each other and reminded of the loveliness of life in small beauties, in spiritual pilgrimages that look a lot like walks or bus rides. Lois rediscovers her faith, and Keillor concludes with these words.
- ✦ "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed. Our lovely world has the power to make us brave. A person wants to be someone else and gets scared and needs to be known, but we ride so far on that bus, we become the stranger. Nevertheless these things stay the same: the sweet breath of spring, the rain, the young tender crops, and the small song birds—God watches each one and knows when it falls, and so much more does God watch us all."
- ✦ What Garrison Keillor and Anne Tyler, and now I, are trying to say is this: maybe we are all trying too hard.
- ✦ This week I drove to Bozeman and back to consider the future of the United Methodist Church in Yellowstone Conference and the Rocky

Mountain Conference (made up of churches in southern Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah). The church we are has a long and amazing history in Montana—so much was accomplished in the early days against so many odds. It was clear that even Brother Van, the founder of so many churches and hospitals and schools, couldn't have done it on his own merits.

- ✦ Maybe some of you know that Brother Van was a good friend of the famous artist Charlie Russell. One of our colleagues from Wyoming had just visited the Russell museum in Great Falls, where he picked up a copy of this letter, written to Brother Van on his birthday, near the end of his life. It puts a lot of this into perspective: (read part of letter).
- ✦ And so, my friends, let us let God do God's job. Ours is to open ourselves to God, to trust God, to live in faith that we need God and God knows this, and will respond with amazing grace, if only we have eyes to see it. Let God do the walking on water, the navigating, the judging. Let us be the selves God dreams for us. Let us use our gifts, appreciate, lovingly challenge and accept each other. Let God transform us. It's not so hard. Let us live in faith, getting on with the business of living our lives confidently, always looking for the moments of grace, the new things God wants to teach us. Doing our best to love and serve and notice the presence of God. In ourselves, in each other, in our world.
- ✦ Amen.

Sources:

Garrison Keillor, "Aprille," in Listening for God. 1994.

Anne Tyler, Back When We Were Grown-ups. 2003.