

TRANSFORMED

Preached by The Rev. Ruth E. Shaver at The United Church of Schellsburg, June 11, 2006

Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 6:1-8

John 3:1-17

One of my favorite wisdom stories comes in various forms from several eastern traditions. I like the Chinese version best, partly because it's so simple and partly because it encapsulates one of the key ideals of humanity so very nicely.

A man whose wife had just given birth to his first son – after six daughters – looked around at the world and realized that it was not a very nice place in which to live. “I am going to change the world!” he declared, and leaving his wife and children behind, he set out to do just that.

After many weeks attempting to talk with the leaders of the world, he realized that he could not change the world, so he decided to change his country, instead. Likewise, after months of trying to talk with the emperor and his advisors, the man realized that he would not be able to change his country. He went back to his province and attempted for months to get an appointment with the provincial governor, who refused to see him because he was not important enough.

Disappointed but undeterred, the man decided that the place he could change was his city, so he went to the mayor. The mayor heard him out but refused to make any of the changes the man deemed necessary. Now frustrated, the man went home and declared that he would be changing his family.

His wife, his six daughters, and his now 3-year old son laughed at him. They needed no changes, thank you, they were very happy as they were.

The man became depressed. Even the birth of another daughter could not cheer him, and so for many years he sat in his room and gloomily berated his family, his city, his province, his country, and the world in general.

One day, when his youngest daughter was 6, she came in to him with his tea. “Father, why are you so sad?” she asked.

He told her of his misadventures in trying to change things.

“Oh, Father, that's terrible! But if you can't change all of those things, maybe you can learn to be happy anyway.”

The man laughed cynically at his daughter. “It is not that simple, child. You will see when you are older.”

Yet he found himself thinking about what his daughter said for many days and many nights, until one morning he decided that he was going to try being happy instead of sad. He laughed when his son tried to chase a stubborn rooster out of the hen house. He thanked his wife for making a good meal. He hugged each of his daughters.

After a few days, he noticed that his family had changed. They were much more the way he always wanted them to be – polite, caring, and industrious.

In a few months, he noticed that his city had become more like the city he had always wanted to live in – clean, friendly, beautiful.

The next year, he noticed that his country had become more like the country he had always wanted to live in – strong, benevolent, fair.

And not too long afterward, he realized that the world had become the one he had wanted to live in – peaceful, diverse, amazing.

He finally accomplished what he had set out to do so many years before, all because he had transformed himself.

Jesus' point to Nicodemus is about transformation. To be born from above – which Nicodemus obligingly calls being "born again" – is to be transformed by coming to understand God's love for us at the deepest level of our hearts. Unfortunately, the entire notion of being "born again" has been co-opted to mean that only people who pass a particular litmus test for transformation are true Christians. I personally have failed that test on numerous occasions because I refuse to check my brain at the door when I enter the halls of faith. The part I always fail – aside from being a woman called to ordained ministry – comes down to Biblical interpretation. The strict fundamentalist definition of faith demands unquestioning acceptance of the Bible as the inerrant word of God. I'm sorry; I've read Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. They disagree with each other on the very order of the days of creation. If the Bible is always correct, then someone other than Lucy has some 'splainin' to do.

I'm here to tell you this morning that being "born again" is not about passing anyone else's litmus test or avowing a creed or a set of doctrines. To be "born again" is to become a new being in Christ by accepting the inalienable fact that God loves each and every one of us because we are his children. To be "born again" is to allow the Holy Spirit to blow where it will in your life, just as the disciples allowed the wind of Pentecost to blow through them at the birth of the church. To be "born again" is to be a mirror of God's love in the world in every thought, word, and deed in response to the quickening of awareness in our hearts.

To be "born again" is to be burned by the cleansing coals and to know God's eternal forgiveness, mercy, and grace. To be "born again" is to say, as Isaiah said, "Here I am. Send me," when the Lord asks, "Whom shall I send?"

I really think we should reclaim as our own that our from the Pentecostal and evangelical brothers and sisters have is the tradition of testimony in worship. I know because I've heard some of the stories already that there are amazing stories of how people came to know God's love in a personal, powerful way – that moment when transformation came and afterward you were an undeniably different person.

Sometimes, these are called conversion moments; if someone of an evangelical background asks when you accepted Jesus, these kinds of experiences are generally what they're asking about.

My testimony is important for you to hear because you need to know how it is that I can proclaim the Gospel to you from the depths of my heart despite seminary's best efforts to make it all about the nether reaches of my brain. When I was a junior in college, I had the privilege of traveling to Poland and Israel with a Jewish group for a Holocaust education tour. We went to Auschwitz and Birkenau; visited the old synagogue in Krakow; saw the remains of an old Jewish learning center town that had relocated lock, stock, and barrel to Palestine in about 1902; and ate half-frozen Kosher meals barely defrosted in the only Kosher oven in Communist Poland at that time. As overwhelming as those things were, it was at Majdanek, however, that my first and thus far only crisis of faith occurred.

Majdanek was, like Auschwitz, a labor-death camp. Where Auschwitz had become the showpiece of the Communist government in Poland for cataloguing Nazi atrocities, Majdanek had received very little attention in the 45 years since its liberation. The barracks were mostly collapsing amid overgrown weeds and the barbed-wire fence had more rust than steel in many places. Only the main administrative portion of the camp had been made presentable, and that only with the addition of a few signs and some railings up the steps into the barracks within that further segregated area.

At the time, there were three barracks open to the public, each about 100 yards long, 10 wide, and divided down the middle by a raised walkway about 3 feet off the ground. One of them was as close to an homage to the Communist victory over the Nazis as one got at Majdanek. The other two were designed to shock and dismay. They accomplished the task.

Shoes . . . hundreds of thousands of pairs of shoes of every size and shape imaginable, from an infant's tiny booties to a man's workboots, from a child's loafers to a lady's dress shoes, piled to the top of the boards on either side of the walkways the entire length of the buildings. The smell alone, that of rotting leather, was bad enough, but add the stench to the implications of what I was seeing and I was nearly on my knees right there. Nothing at Auschwitz spoke about the individual victims like the shoes at Majdanek.

From the barracks with the shoes, we went into the bath house, which contained an actual gas chamber. In that room, I could see claw marks in the plaster walls where terrified victims had tried to escape before succumbing to the Zyklon B gas, exterminated by the same chemicals that pest control specialists used to use to rid houses of termites. Zyklon B leaves a deep turquoise stain on white plaster as the pellets sublime in humid air; the streaks would have been beautiful if not for the deadly implications of their presence. Overwhelmed emotionally as I was, when the rabbi began to sing the Kaddish in the gas chamber, a traditional Jewish prayer that sounds mournful but celebrates life, I was completely devastated. It was my crisis of faith, right there in the gas chamber at Majdanek.

I was devastated. How could God have allowed this to happen?

I had no answers then, although seeing the way that Israeli culture had blossomed in the years since the Holocaust held a little of the pain at bay. The national Israeli Holocaust museum, Yad Vashem, celebrated life as much as death was mourned, yet the memorial to the one million Jewish children who died during the Holocaust opened my wound even more deeply. In this room, a single candle burns, reflected onto a million pieces of mirror. These million points of light make the room almost as bright as daylight, graphically illustrating the loss to humanity that these lives represent.

How could God have allowed this to happen?

The rabbi told me to read the story of Holy Week and sent me to church on Easter Sunday. I read all four Gospel stories of Holy Week at least twice. I went to church on Easter Sunday, which was a tremendous service of music and readings.

Only as I was walking down the street to the rabbi's apartment after church did it all come together for me. I got it.

God didn't allow it to happen.

Human beings *caused* it to happen.

Human beings who had never experienced the unconditional love that God has for each of us.

And I was being called to show that love to others because God had loved me through my anger and lack of understanding, had loved me into understanding after an Easter Sunday service when I heard the words that I had known since kindergarten in a whole new way: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

I didn't know at the time, but that was the first time God tried to get my attention about the ministry, which is a story to be told another time.

When did God love you through anger and confusion? When did God love you into understanding in a profoundly different way what it means to be his child? When were you "born again?"

Love transforms us. God's unconditional love changes us whenever we let it in to work in our lives. Through us, God's unconditional love can transform others. We plant the tiniest seeds with our thoughts, words, and deeds, witnessing God's love to everyone we meet.

I pray that you will come to know your own faith story in a new way, so that you can begin to name and claim a time or times when you have been "born again", profoundly changed by God's overwhelming unconditional love. I promise I won't make you talk about it from the pulpit, but I'd love to hear your stories. They are proof that God is still speaking and proof that God still so loves the world that his Son and the Holy Spirit are working in our hearts today to bring peace and wholeness to each of us.

AMEN.