

God's Grace Leads to Transformation

Philippians 3:12-21; Communion

Some things in nature are a complete mystery to me. How can an insect that crawls on the ground be changed into one that flies? How can a black, fuzzy, rather ugly creature be transformed into a beautiful, fascinating creature with brightly colored wings? How can a destructive insect that can literally strip a tree of its leaves become a dainty creature that can land on the petal of a flower blossom without defacing it? In short, how can a caterpillar become a butterfly?

The word for this is metamorphosis. It's a fancy word to describe what happens when a caterpillar spins a hard cocoon around itself and some days later emerges as a butterfly. Metamorphosis also happens when a person who is indifferent or hostile toward God becomes a deeply committed follower of Jesus Christ. Metamorphosis also happens when a person who is a slave to destructive sinful habits becomes a person who is self-controlled, gentle, caring and compassionate.

Metamorphosis has happened to all of us. Some of us have had painful experiences. Some of us have had life changing experiences that will always scar us. Some of us have had puzzling, emotion laden, conflicts with family members, co-workers, or with neighbors. Some of us haven't had major life changes but nevertheless – our Creator has left a mark on us. In this church there have been things done, that still reverberate in our actions, words, and church life. Every church has some scars, hurts and emotional upheaval.

But you know what? God has made us his own. God keeps doing the work of metamorphosis in us individually and as a body of believers. We don't fully understand how God exactly does it. We just have faith that we are pardoned, nurtured, healed, and grow. We know Jesus is alive and well because of who we were, and who we now are, and who we will become. This is part of the grace God gives us. And we can proclaim that a testimony is a godly metamorphosis story.

In 2 Corinthians 3:18 we read about the spiritual reality of metamorphosis. The word the Bible uses is "transformed." "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."

The Greek word for transformation is megamorphoomai. The English word metamorphosis means essentially the same. Let's consider the fascinating and instructive way Paul uses this word to describe the spiritual transformation in the life of a Christian. The process is just as mysterious, and the results are even more striking.

The God, who made the caterpillar that transforms into one of the most intriguing creatures, also takes humans who were created in his own image, and keeps working in us to transform us, from one degree to another, into Almighty God's loving image. The Almighty not only takes individuals, but he takes a whole church and transforms it. This is an important concept in the Christian life. God tells us that the work of the Holy Spirit is in us to keep changing us, to keep growing us, to keep transforming us. This work frees us more and more from sinful traits and develops within us over time the virtues of the Christlike character.

This transformation that Yahweh does in us, takes our painful childhood experiences, our painful memories, our guilt, our shame, our gut ways of acting out in life and slowly transforms them. Isn't this exciting! We are promised the caterpillar inside each of us, is turning into a butterfly. We are promised: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, are a a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor 5:17) Titus 3:5 tells us, "He saved us through the washing of rebirth, or regeneration, and renewal by the Holy Spirit."

Think back and consider these questions.

How has God regenerated you?

Where do you see your spiritual maturity today in comparison to 5, 10, 25 years ago?

Have you been allowing God to transform you into his likeness?

Do you today let the Holy Spirit renew you more than you did in the past?

In what areas is your cooperation with God in the renewal process in your life becoming more frequent and fruitful?

In Philippians 4:13 we read, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." So as we cooperate with God he transforms us. If we don't want transformation, we are not forced. When we focus on the goal Jesus has for us, transformation occurs. When we are willing to be transformed, our Creator is more than willing to do so. This is the principle of being responsible, yet dependent. We are dependent on God's transforming grace to work in us. And we are responsible to allow it to happen and to help it happen.

Consider what it would take for you to become a golfer. First you have to be interested in doing so. Then you would have to cooperate with this desire. To be transformed into a golfer you need to step on to the golf course, with clubs, and start swinging. It would be best if you would take some classes, practice a lot, and then play regularly. As you increase your knowledge, gain experience, over time, somehow you would develop the perfect golf swing. If you want to learn golf, you need to take responsibility to learn, be open to correction, and practice. Then your body and mind will, hopefully cooperate.

There is the same concept in the spiritual realm. We as believers need to have the goal of Christlikeness. In Romans 8:28-29 the apostle Paul says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." But this only occurs with those who love God and follow God's plans. It's not an automatic happening, unless we love God and respond to God's call of grace & discipleship.

Both the words transformed and conformed have the word formed in them. This means to pattern

or mold. So when we depend on the Holy Spirit and also take responsibility for our lives, we are being transformed so that we will eventually be conformed to the likeness of Jesus. Isn't this marvelous? God grace stoops to us. God seeks us out. God saves us. And then God helps us to mature and grow into being like Jesus Christ. In other words God wants us to, and helps us to develop the qualities that Jesus had.

In Ephesians 4:22-24 we read, "You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." So Paul tells us, get on with being transformed. Get busy and not live in the past with old hurts, old pain, old grudges, old complaints, and old excuses. We cannot ignore the past or deny it, but as we let the Holy Spirit work in us, the past gets transformed into new things. Our thinking and attitudes get transformed. We get transformed with new learning and new qualities in us.

When I was a young man, I was in Cub Scouts. We had a book of activities we needed to do to get merit badges. The cub leader put us boys into different groups and fostered a competition between the groups. To help my group win the competition I got real busy doing as many of the projects as I had time for. But then I got impatient. I decided to forge my mother's signature. I did not do a convincing job of it and so the cub leader confronted me. Then she set up a time to meet with me and my parents. Between being confronted at the cub scout meeting, in front of everyone, and the meeting with my parents, I broke my arm. Needless to say, my parents implied that maybe the breaking of my arm was God telling me that I needed to learn to be honest. It did get me out of being punished by them.

Since that painful experience of being caught, being shamed in front of my friends, breaking my arm, my parents being told about what I did, and the implication that God seemingly reached out to hurt me, I have at times over reacted in

situations when I felt others were not honest. It is a button people are able to push. But this also taught me about lying, dishonesty and deception at an experiential level. Even today, at times I get really steamed up when I see others who are being corrupt, fraudulent and dishonest.

As God has been at work in my life, I hope that experience is transforming me into a desire to be truthful. And God has been transforming that painful experience into helping me love people who are dishonest. I hope I sympathize more.

This is how God transforms us. He takes what happened in the past, be it good or bad, and uses it to help us grow into the likeness of God. This is grace. We depend on God to mold us, while we take responsibility for ourselves. This involves opening ourselves up to honest introspection. It involves being honest with ourselves so our Creator can mold us. It often involves some new pain. The pain of healing, growing, recognizing my faults, laying to rest the shame of public humiliation. And recognizing that the timing of the broken arm was coincidence but probably God was talking to me in love and not vengeance. I believe that pain and that experience combined with the pain of opening myself up to God's transformation, has made me who I am today. And God keeps transforming me as I allow him.

All of us here today have had painful experiences. With these experiences, God has reached out and provided healing. There are also past experiences and memories that some of us are not able yet to let God transform. Some of us even may not be allowing God to use some of our good experiences to renew us. I urge you, go to Jesus with your pain. Go to your Creator with your reluctance to relive the past. Go to the Holy Spirit with your unwillingness to take the next spiritual step. Go to God with your fearful memories. Trust that your Creator loves you. Trust the Almighty that the pain of healing will transform the pain of shame, embarrassment, guilt, hurt, anger, rebellion and laziness. Trust God so that transformation will lead you more into Christlikeness.

It may also be necessary and helpful for you to talk with someone. Find someone who can listen, reflect with you, and assure you that God does transform us as we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Let's not allow our pasts to keep us from letting God renew us. Let's not let our pain and pride keep us from being transformed. Let's not allow our biases to keep us from being honest with ourselves. Let's not allow anything to come between us and God's grace filled transforming power. Let's take responsibility for ourselves so the Holy Spirit can continue his good work in us.

In Hebrews 12:9 & 10 we get another slant on this theme. "Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness." Isn't it amazing that God wants us to share his holiness?

Let's aim at being holy. Let's aim at letting God take us, use us, and even more, transform us into his likeness. To allow this to happen in our lives, we need to allow the Holy Spirit to do a miracle in us. We need to be honest with ourselves so God's work can happen in us. We need to learn to hate sin. We need to learn lots of spiritual things like love, patience, kindness, charity, generosity, and so on. We need to learn to not let tradition or fear block that new thing God has for us. But maybe most of all today, we need to turn over the things in our past and present that are hindering us from God's transforming hand and Spirit. And we need to be totally honest with ourselves. Maybe you have been "good" all your life, but have you really been open to allow your Creator to transform you?

We know God has been at work in us by how far we have come. Let's continue in our individual and church spiritual metamorphosis. God's transforming power is real. The Almighty's work of redemption leads us to being conformed into his image. It happens somehow in the paradox of depending on God and as we take responsibility for ourselves. Let us live in the

promise of "He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory," as our deepest desire and goal in life. Jesus' Good News is: God loves you too much to leave you the way you are! That's transforming grace! This is a great reason to be thankful – always!