

Sermon: “Transformation and Renewal” Deacon Kellie

August 23, 2020

Over the years, my husband Paul's family has shared many stories of his maternal grandmother, Myrtle Carroll. Myrtle was born in 1889 and lived until her death in 1984 at the age of 94. During the span of her life, she experienced tremendous changes in her personal life and in the wider world. She was born 14 years before the Wright Brothers' flight at Kitty Hawk and lived to see the moon walk and the space shuttle. She experienced two world wars, the 1918 Spanish Flu Pandemic, the Great Depression, wars in Korea and Vietnam, eighteen U.S. presidents, the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and Watergate. She had nine children and was a sharecropper in Missouri before she and her family moved across the country to California during the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930's. The world that existed at her birth was tremendously different at the end of her life, and throughout those 94 years she surely experienced many times when she felt disappointed and fearful about what was going on around her and other periods when the changes and advancements she saw amazed and astounded her. Through all of those years filled with crisis and strife as well as advancement and innovation, she continued her life, working with her husband to raise children who loved and cared for each other and who, in turn, passed that love on to their own children.

I have been thinking of Myrtle's life recently as the pressures of our current time seem especially all-consuming and stressful. Although I'm generally an optimistic person, not prone to despair or cynicism, I've discovered that I've reached the age where I am tempted to think things like, "When I was younger, things were so much better," or "Everything is falling apart. There's never been another time when there was so much wrong with the world." It's not difficult to spiral into this kind of pessimism and hopelessness as we see the news filled with great political, social, and economic unrest and conflict and we are limited and isolated by pandemic-related distancing, while also dealing with our own personal struggles and challenges. As I am tempted to hold onto the fearful ideas that everything is worse than it's ever been, I can look back to Myrtle Carroll and see that there were plenty of scary, dangerous, uncertain times she faced too. What sustained Myrtle and others like her as they weathered the ups and downs and changes in their lives, and where do we look for courage and strength and direction during our own times of trouble?

These thoughts bounced around in my head as I read and re-read our morning's passage from Romans. These words are familiar to me, and I've often heard the language about conforming to the world discussed as a caution against somehow being too "worldly" and too much influenced by the trends of the day. I have heard Paul's words portrayed as urging Christians to keep themselves separate from anyone and anything not

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expressly Christian. I’ve also understood that this section warns against being too caught up in the money, power, and greed often so valued by society.

However, when I listened to these words this week, feeling heavily the weight of all that is wrong right now, seemingly everywhere, I heard something a little different in Paul’s appeal. Something that always catches my attention in scripture are references to fear and the many ways God’s people are encouraged to let go of the fears that hold them back. Now, these verses from Romans don’t include a direct reference to fear, but I hear in Paul’s plea to avoid being conformed to this world a warning against becoming consumed by fear and worry over the changes and chances of life. Instead of trying to desperately hold onto whatever our culture or our community or our earthly wants deem to be essential and in need of protecting, Paul encourages not conformation but transformation - a renewal of our minds focused on discerning the will of God.

What might it look like for us if we were fully open to the transformation of our lives, changed and renewed in ways shaped by God’s will? What might be different?

I love the way that the first two verses of the 12th chapter in Romans are expressed in Eugene Peterson’s *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* and imagine that this is the way of living that Paul advocates.

So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for (God). Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what (God) wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

This does not describe separating from the world, cutting ourselves off from the people, events, and issues that surround us, but instead urges us to focus our attention on God as we go about our everyday, ordinary lives, during our routine and regular days as well as amidst those filled with chaos, change, and turmoil - making each day an offering to God. And what comes from giving that daily attention and making our offering is that God brings out the best in us - what is good and acceptable and perfect.

It is important to note, I think, that for God to bring out the best in us we must be open to change, to renewal, and not just a one-time adjustment or superficial alteration.

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The change that happens when we offer our whole selves to God is transformation from the inside out - with nothing off limits or outside of God's reach. This change is ongoing as well. Whether we are 2 years old, 22, 62, or 102, God's renewal working through us is unceasing and prepares us to respond in ways that are good, acceptable, and perfect in new situations, with different people, unfamiliar circumstances, and unexpected challenges. You do need to be willing to be changed, which for most of us is easier said than done.

How many of us are ready to acknowledge that our actions and attitudes need changing? Each of us makes choices and decisions and holds opinions based on what we think is right. Most people don't intentionally set out to hurt or to harm. Even when we struggle with bad habits, negative attitudes, and destructive actions, it is often easier to just keep doing what we know rather than to be receptive to changing to something new. We can also get to a point where we are just tired of challenge and upheaval and would prefer to avoid the disruptions and difficulties that come with transformation. Sometimes it's just simpler to remain as we are, so comfortable and well-adjusted in what we know that getting by doesn't require much effort or thought.

I can share with you from personal experience that opening up to God's transformation and renewal isn't a relaxing or easy undertaking. Several years ago, I began a process to discern whether I was being called to a different kind of ministry in the church. Truthfully, at the beginning I didn't think I would be changed much by the process - other than I understood that if I were ordained there would be some additional time commitments involved and a few uncomfortable responsibilities to assume (giving sermons being at the top of the challenging list). I had been a lifetime churchgoer, I'd read the Bible and studied scripture, and I considered myself to be basically a good and faithful person, so I didn't anticipate much change in how I understood my role as a follower of Jesus.

Being a very responsible person, I did take the process of discernment seriously and was prepared to be open to wherever the path led. I can tell you, that path was rocky, challenging, frustrating, eye-opening, and ultimately life-changing in ways I never expected. That discernment and renewal and transformation did not end at ordination, either - it continues each and every day and is still rocky, challenging, frustrating, eye-opening, and life-changing, and I still struggle at times with wanting to fall back into what is easy and comfortable. But there are also times when I can see God bringing out the best in me in ways that would never happen if I had remained comfortable and content with my place in the world.

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I am also thankful to be surrounded by so many people who open themselves up daily to God’s renewal and transformation. Your willingness to be changed and to be part of the work of God’s kingdom is evident in how you use your gifts - in faithful prophecy, by ministering to others, in teaching and exhortation, through generous giving, diligent leading, and with cheerful compassion. God brings out the best in each of you, and the world is renewed through this transformation.

May we all be prepared each day to be open to God’s renewal in our lives - on the ordinary days, during difficult times, when we are tired, when we are joyful, and at every other time. And may we have faith in God’s continual presence through it all.

Let us pray.

Be present, O merciful God, and protect us through the hours and days and weeks of this current time, so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

(Prayer from the BCP, An Order for Compline, Page 133.)