

Loving - Transforming Sermon for Last Epiphany
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1 Cor. 11:27-13:13, Luke 9:28-36

This morning's readings are so familiar. Simply put, they are about love and transformation, in that order. These are big nouns, and they can be used in both the religious and the secular sense. We talk about the Transfiguration in the Gospel story – a miraculous event, a radiant vision, a voice from a cloud. I have no idea what really happened – but it seems that both Jesus and the disciples who saw it were transformed – Jesus' changed appearance gave them new insight into who he was. A transformation story like this is very Biblical, very appealing, suggesting divine force at work. God's power to reveal Godself at work in the man Jesus in ways that transformed the lives of all who met him. Fine – a great story, and it may or may not suggest parallels with our own lives. I've come up with a few and used them in sermons over the years, but the metaphor suggested by the story may seem way to obscure to signify something about how God transforms us.

But what about how love transforms us? Ah, now we have something we know about! And today we read the transfiguration story in connection with St. Paul's stunning passage about love. It moves us to tears, especially at weddings, perhaps because we so long for this kind of love to be real and lasting and because we realize how often we fall short of this ideal, how often we fail. Paul presents love as the greatest of all spiritual gifts – patient, kind, not boastful or rude, not insisting on its own way, enduring, hoping believing all things – it's a powerful vision of what love can our should be at its best.

But in the passage, love is a noun, an abstraction to be sought, or lamented in its absence. As a noun, love has no power to transform. Love must be a verb, something we live in thought and word and action. But it is in loving, in acting in loving ways, that real transformation can happen. Transformation and love, these nouns that are our themes this morning, need to be verbs if they are to matter in our lives.

Fortunately, they already are. To love and to transform are perfectly good, long-standing verbs. They are not like some of these newly invented verbs, born of attempts at a kind of contemporary linguistic shorthand – verbs like “to gift” or “to workshop”, or “to language”. I'm reminded of a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon on this subject – one character, after hearing a couple of such words comments to the other “verbing nouns weirds the language”. But I digress...

When we combine the two verbs, loving and transforming, we can then think about how love transforms – us, each other, and the world around us. My favorite song writer wrote a song based on today's reading from Corinthians called “Love is a Verb”. A couple of the lines say “When love becomes loving, then real things start to happen, and love is received as a fact and not an ideal.”

Loving and transforming, unlike the abstractions their nouns present, are messy and difficult; they are active; they bring change. When you keep on treating someone in a loving way, even if your feelings are otherwise (whether it's your spouse, or your child, a friend, another group, even another nation), even when they've disappointed or hurt you – that is active and real. You are taking the risk of hoping and believing that acting loving will bring about change in the relationship, in the other and in you. Maybe it will; maybe not – it's a risk. But acting unloving, or avoiding the other just cuts you off or reinforces anger – no one is transformed in a good way, and often escalation of the conflict ensues.

Of course, acting loving sometimes needs to include what is often called tough love – making demands or setting conditions in a relationship that might feel severe but which are necessary to promote health and responsibility. Real loving, as opposed to ideal love probably has more power to transform than anything, but often we're too scared to try. Often we hold back from loving – we think we don't have what it takes, or we fear we'll be disappointed.

Recently, Bill and I saw a good movie about loving and its power to transform – “The Painted Veil”, based on a Somerset Maugham novel. Despite the good looks and star power of Edward Norton and Naomi Watts, this is not a story about ideal, romantic love. It's a story about hard, painful, frustrating loving and forgiving in which two people are profoundly transformed. A young couple marry for mostly the wrong reasons, not knowing each other well, each believing in love – the noun – for his and her own reasons. When mutual disappointment leads to betrayal on the part of the wife, the husband is unforgiving. So much so that he takes a dangerous, demanding assignment in rural China, combating cholera among the orphans and the poor in a hospital run by dedicated nuns. This is his punishment for his somewhat spoiled and childish wife – he gives her no way out but to go with him.

In this remote setting, with their feelings and ideas about love all but destroyed, the couple is faced with the hard business of loving, and, in a way, I think they manage only because they have no choice. It is the husband, a doctor's, job to care for the contagious, violently ill people; it is his wife's desperate loneliness that drives her, finally to join him at the hospital. There's a kind of transfiguration as she recognizes his dedication to researching a cure, the long hot days and nights he works, at the extreme of exhaustion, his compassion for his patients even as he remains cold and distant to her. She begins working with the young orphans there, teaching them and letting the older nuns befriend her. She warms also towards the eccentric neighbor couple who love each other with a tenderness and acceptance that have nothing to do with ideal romance. As the newlywed couple continue to act in loving ways to others, even if only out of duty and desperation, they begin to change. Forgiveness becomes possible. The process is uneven and drawn out, but over time it transforms the image that each has of the other.

As I watched this movie, I had a sense of something happening to this couple as much as I felt that they were trying to restore their marriage. In one scene, an old nun with a lovely, radiant, wise face, says to the young wife, “when love and duty together are inside you, there is grace”. Enigmatic words – I'm not sure what they mean – but maybe it's that when obligation, the need to be loving or caring, and feeling love and compassion join together inside us – that's a gift. There was no overt God talk in the movie – but if God is Love, and I believe God is, then I think this movie shows love and transformation both – not as nouns, but as verbs.

When we give ourselves to the active work of loving, in the ways that St. Paul describes, it may often feel like seeing in a mirror dimly, hardly knowing what to do or what to expect. But his promise is that, with God's help, we will see more clearly, know more fully. Loving, over time, will transform us; it will open us to a new understanding of those we love and a new vision – a splendid, radiant vision – of how the love of God working in us, really can change our hearts and our world. And maybe that's transfiguration. Amen.