

**TOGETHER WE GROW: THE LIFE OF THE MIND; MARK 10:46-52;  
OCTOBER 25, 2009 – REFORMATION SUNDAY; THY/WPC**

Today is Reformation Sunday. Each year in October we recall that movement of reform and renewal, transformation really, begun by Martin Luther and John Calvin.

It is acknowledged that Calvin was the pre-eminent Reformer since Luther's goal was the reform of the Roman church of which he was a part while Calvin and his colleagues were more than reforming a tradition.

They were establishing a new church and a new understanding of discipleship.

One of the most revolutionary things Luther and Calvin did was to translate the bible into the language of the people: German, French and English.

It was important, they felt, for ordinary church goers to be able to read the biblical story in their own language for two reasons: first, so they would not be subject to the flawed interpretations of the religious hierarchy; and second, because faith always begins as a personal response to the Good News.

Being able to read the bible was a matter of spiritual life and death at a time when very few could read. So making the bible available in the vernacular forced a system of public education to be established. Fortunately, for the Reformers, Guttenberg had just invented his printing press so the bible could be printed and be widely distributed.

It is not surprising that Presbyterians have started more schools and colleges than virtually any other denomination. We believed from the very beginning that for faith to take hold in a person's life, for faith to be real in day-to-day living, not just the endorsement of the heart, but the intellect was necessary.

Some religious communities, like the Moravians, had no theology. Others, like the Anglicans, had no intellectual quibble with Rome. And still others, pre-cursors to the Pentecostal churches, practiced a faith primarily grounded in emotion.

But Calvin lobbied not only for a learned ministry but learned church goers. Not only ought followers of Jesus be able to read the bible but, he said, they ought to apply their faith to the life and times of the society in which they live out that faith which takes critical thinking.

You can see how commitment to the life of the mind is alive and well here at Westminster. Westminster Early Childhood Programs, our ENERGY after-school tutoring program; and rich educational opportunities for children and adults on Sundays.

It's safe to say these programs are based on the notion that education plays a central role in our pursuit of the abundant life God offers and our response to the Good News. What's the connection between education and transformed living? The example of Bartimaeus today provides an answer. Stories, like his, of healing physical blindness tell us that Jesus also heals our spiritual blindness.

Opening our eyes is a metaphor for opening our minds and hearts and getting our lives back on track, like Bartimaeus did when Mark says, "immediately when he regained his sight he followed Jesus on the way."

But in case you haven't noticed there is a very large elephant standing in the room. I'd like to talk about this elephant briefly because ignoring him will only enable us to go merrily on our way thinking we're doing our job when it comes to the life of the mind.

No one can be part of the church without possessing faith, even the faith of a mustard seed. But many churches do not equip their members to express the faith they possess.

So members continue to be reminded of what a Christian *is*, without gaining clear biblical counsel regarding what a Christian *does*. Faith possessed must be faith expressed if God's purpose for us is to be realized.

Faith can be known as much as it can be felt. The great minds of Western civilization for the first 1800 years since Jesus, were not exclusively, but essentially, the great minds of the church: Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin.

But here's the litmus test. Unless it can be observed is faith real? Activist Jim Wallis says, "In the bible, faith is not something you possess but rather something you practice. You have to put it into action," he says, "or it really doesn't mean anything. Faith changes things. It is the energy of transformation for individuals and communities."

Organized religion, the church, has a long history of transferring spiritual knowledge – what can be known about the faith – but we have an equally long tradition of producing enlightened followers whose lifestyles remain unchanged by that spiritual knowledge.<sup>i</sup>

The name of the elephant I'm talking about today is 'knowledge by itself'; of the bible, of theology, of ethics, of morality, of history – you name it – knowledge without action, knowledge without practice, knowledge without transformation. This would have been inconceivable to Calvin since, for him, knowledge was the basis of his action, of the changes he was making to the church and world.

The epistle of James is unequivocal, "Faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may say, 'You have faith, and I have works: show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.'"

Or Jesus' searing words on the importance of actions rooted in biblical understanding: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness."

One of the reasons I like the term 'spiritual formation' better than 'religious education' is because education is more than a cognitive experience. It is preparation for living. Our role as a congregation is to equip our children to live well – as we pledged to do for Fiona and Grace, and our 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders getting bibles today.

Education ought to make some visible, tangible difference in our lives. It's why I never conclude a class on Sunday morning without asking, at the end of the session: How does this apply to our life at Westminster? What will I do differently Monday morning because of what I've learned here today?

It is significant that the history of the first century of the church is called the Book of Acts, not the Book of Truths.<sup>ii</sup>

For education to have teeth, for it to have any power at all to form us spiritually, it has to teach obedience to God. I know, that word “obedience” is tough. We don’t like it in our ‘me’ society, in this consumer world where we get to have everything “our” way.

But if we are not obedient to God, just ourselves, then what is the point of transformation? The great theme of the bible is God’s intervention with the human family – to transform it. Only God can transform us.

Yet, if we are obedient to God only in some cases, in the less challenging or risky parts of our lives then how can we trust God’s purpose and will for the larger areas of living – like marriage and family life, career, business relationships?

Nor, if we are honest, can we dump knowledge into minds and expect to change old habits and behaviors without open, candid, trusting relationships. Such relationships are the incubators of transformed lives. The paradox is that through obedience to God’s purpose for my life I find ultimate freedom because I am no longer stuck or paralyzed or held back by my own inflated agenda or someone else’s purpose for my life.

If our relationships with one another in the Christian community are the incubators of transformed lives then mission is where we test our new wings. The Westminster Economic Development Initiative was established, as John Perry reminds me, for giving us more opportunities to put our faith into action. I’m not saying WEDI is the only place where we do mission. One of the great things about this congregation is that there are so many behind the scenes care givers and community leaders. But maybe it’s time to take a congregational inventory.

I heard the heart-breaking news at a recent WEDI board meeting that we have five children on a waiting list to enter our ENERGY after-school tutoring program because we don’t have enough tutors. Our tutors who include community members are doubled and tripled-up with students.

We are blessed from time to time with amazing examples of putting faith into action.

Clarence Jordan, Southern Baptist preacher who got his Ph.D. in New Testament studies then went promptly Americus, GA to start the Koinonia Commune in the 1950s before desegregation or civil rights during the McCarthy era. Jordan and his colleagues were bombed and shot at and called communists.

But the Koinonia Farm is where Millard Fuller took refuge during a low point in his life, in the 1960s, tired of making money and living in a fractured marriage; so he started something called Habitat for Humanity.

And just this past week, from the Muslim world comes the remarkable example of a lone Iranian cleric Mehdi Karroubi. Imam Karroubi said in the face of death threats from the Iranian government, that the government of Iran has lost all legitimacy.

He watched from his home in Tehran in recent months as his aides have been arrested, his offices raided, his newspaper shut down and his own life threatened and his response to the authorities was, bring it on!

When he charged that protestors in the recent demonstrations in Iran opposing President Ahmadinejad were raped in jail a special clerical council said they would put Karroubi on trial for false accusations.

The next day his website carried this message: “The ugliness has reached the point that instead of the people behind the oppression, it is Medhi Karroubi they want to put on trial. I take refuge with you, oh God, from these catastrophes which are a disgrace to Islam and to Iran.”<sup>iii</sup>

Faith without action, knowledge without action is dead. But faith and knowledge that find expression in life-changing behavior is the way God uses her people to transform the world.

I’m not saying we have to end up on trial for our faith to see if our knowledge passes the litmus test. But I am saying that the way God brings about reform is through men and women using their best judgment in this complicated world for some mitzvah, some act of justice or charity or compassion.

If Westminster is to pursue transformation, if we are to grow together, then Jesus calls us like he did Bartimaeus to follow him on the way.

The way is often strange and awkward; it invariably leads to new priorities that demand sacrifice; obedience and trust that mean making ourselves vulnerable.

But those who find themselves on the way also talk about deep peace and joy. The more we encourage one another to allow God to transform us, the more signs of new life will bubble up in the way we interact and the way we give – our time and talent, and our treasure for sure. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Milifred Minatrea, *Shaped By God’s Heart: The Passion and Practice of Missional Churches* (San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2004) 53ff.

<sup>ii</sup> Shaped, 53ff.

<sup>iii</sup> Michael Slackman, “A Lone Cleric Is Loudly Defying Iran’s Leaders,” *The New York Times*, Friday October 23, 2009, A1, A23.