

**TOGETHER WE GROW: FROM TRANSACTION TO TRANSFORMATION;  
MARK 9:30-37; REVELATION 22:1-5; SEPTEMBER 20, 2009; THY/WPC**

Today we launch our stewardship program. We are taking a different approach this year as you will hear later from Paula Elsinghorst and in newsletters and announcements.

At the core of this year's campaign; I would go so far as to say at the core of life itself; is the need for humans, for you and me, to embrace transformation. Maybe you're thinking, 'he's talking about increasing my pledge this year.'

But really, I'm not talking ultimately about the time and talent we give away but more importantly about how we live our lives which is what drives our decisions about giving and serving.

There is a tendency in our times to shrink life. To reduce it to a series of transactions in which we are mostly consumers. While there is much to be said for consumer power and customer satisfaction and competition for consumer loyalty; consumerism, life as transaction, has a downside.

Everything from legal and medical services to car repair and counseling have reduced the relationship of the client or patient or customer to the professional into billable segments. The open give and take that any relationship requires becomes extraneous. It serves no obvious or immediate function. The result is the humanity and art, not to mention the effectiveness of these professions, is lost.

Families run the risk of becoming a cluster of relationships built around transactions. Not because our relating to one another in families is reduced to billable segments but because we are so busy. Children have extra-curricular activities; parents are both often working full time jobs; household duties get divided; weekends are for catching up at work or at home; throw in a piano or ballet lesson or traveling soccer team and cell phones and email become the way families function.

Downsizing life to transactions affects religious communities and the fabric of churches, synagogues and mosques. One local religious leader said he is setting up an adult education program online because people are too busy to come to a class on the bible.

I love the idea of learning online but there's also something to be said for face to face learning where body language and the tone and texture of the human voice communicate important nuances and conversation takes fruitful turns.

What I want to suggest today is that we see our relationship to church and one another not as a transaction but an opportunity for God to transform us

The reading from Mark today is all about transformation; Mark tells how Jesus introduces his disciples to a radical idea, that he will suffer, die and rise again.

This does not fit their prescription for a rabbi. It does not fit their prescription for their rabbi and their expectations that this rabbi would provide glory and prestige.

So having their transactional expectations for who Jesus was and what he would do dashed, they start debating their own worth and importance. At which point Jesus puts

a child in their midst and says if you want to be great, if you want to be a leader, you must become like a child.

It is a transformational moment. I suspect that most of us are like those disciples. We like to have things nailed down. We set expectations and want them fulfilled. Subtly, our expectations can become the reason or priority for a relationship.

And it is precisely at this point where God so often steps in to surprise us. Things don't go the way we want or expect; a door has closed; we feel ourselves succumbing to despair or disappointment. But then something unexpected happens. It changes the way we see ourselves, each other, the world. We let go of the old, limiting expectations and priorities.

Suddenly we see new opportunities and possibilities. We realize what used to seem so important no longer is; we realize we have changed at some deep level. Energy, hope, new life flood back into our lives.

This reminds me of the old saying 'if you want to make God laugh, tell her your plans.' What I'm saying today is that humans are creatures of habit and self-preservation. We fall into routines; we build our lives around a certain way of doing things or path to follow. But that's not how life works.

Congregations, you and I, would do well to practice some form of spiritual stretching; some way to keep us spiritually limber and flexible. Some reminder or mantra to keep us open to God's purposes when the well worn path we are on takes an unexpected turn.

You have shared with me stories of personal well-being and health, parenting, career trials and tribulations. What I have heard so often is the story of transformation. Occasions when some unwanted twist on the road of life led to new life – albeit, often, not without pain.

The other reading today, from the last chapter of the book of Revelation is about transformation too. In poetic imagery the writer tells how heaven and earth will be transformed at the end of history.

The portion we heard today was about the transformation of Eden – that place where the human experiment began and ended in shame and despair. It is interesting, I think, for an urban congregation like Westminster to consider that this transformation takes place in a city.

Essentially, what was happening when John wrote the book of Revelation was that the fledgling Christian church was undergoing severe persecution. The imagery of this book is in letter form to these suffering Christians. All is not lost, John is saying, but the best is yet to come.

The way he says this is by taking the most primal picture of God's relationship to man and woman; a failed relationship, a broken relationship when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden. And John transforms this relationship into a something new.

Where once man and woman dwelt in peace and harmony until their over-reaching egos disrupted that serene shalom – this disrupted paradise is given back to them anew but most importantly they are given back to each other.

At the heart of this transformation is the tree of life. The first tree of life was the source of their destruction when they ate of its fruit. The new tree of life is the source of their healing.

The leaves on the tree are for the healing of the nations. So much healing is needed in our time. So much transformation is needed in our homes and families, our schools, our places of work, our health care system, the church, our business and enterprise.

We seem to be headed down that same old path like Adam and Eve eating forbidden fruit, tempting fate because of our desire for more; or like those disciples treading the path of clashing egos, jockeying for position and power.

Then comes today's word from Scripture – this is not God's plan for you, for me, for us, for the church. Rather God's plan and purpose for our lives is to transform us: our marriages and families and schools and hospitals; our governments and corporations into full and abundant life.

That is, of course what happened to those first disciples. By the end of the story, they've been transformed. They begin a world movement that continues to this day and of which we are a part. It's a movement that depends on transactions of all kinds; maintaining buildings and programs and curricula and staffs.

But what makes it work, what defines it is transformation.

We baptized two children today and in so doing pledged to them our best. That we would be the kind of community in which they would be able to discover who Jesus of Nazareth is so that when they reach maturity they will have the best possible chance of deciding to become followers of Jesus as well. I don't know how we can teach Aria and Logan or any of our children how to be Jesus' followers if we don't teach them and show them in our own example about transformation.

In a world that is increasingly shrinking in terms of the value and meaning of human relationships; in a world that reduces the human experience to functional transactions nothing is more important than to seek God's transformation personally and together.

You might easily say the well-being of our children and the future of the church, the health of the nations depends upon it.

Will it mean an increase in your financial pledge to the church for 2010? I'd have no way of knowing. All I know is that when transformed people decide where to spend their time and energy and resources amazing things happen. Amen.