

Moments of Transformation

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Community of Transfiguration, September 5th, 2024, Mark 7:24-30)

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(Preached by Cheryl Williams at FBC, September 8th, 2024, Mark 7:24-30 & James 2:1-10)

May I begin my reflection with a poem from a Persian poet Hafiz (1325) which Ros shared in our reflective prayer a few weeks ago.

How
Did the rose
Ever open its heart
And give to this world
All its
Beauty?
It felt the encouragement of light
Against its Being.
Otherwise,
We all remain
Too
Frightened.

Spring is in the air – roses are getting ready to bud, the sweet peas, daffodils, orchids are in full flower, fruit trees are blossoming full of promise.

Transformation is all around us.

One of the brothers at the Community of Transfiguration, took the offcuts from our balustrade on the admin building and transformed them into beautiful crosses that can be held in one's hand and provide comfort to many.

Me, I take balls of wool and transform them into gifts for children, which I hope brings them some joy and comfort.

Over the last thirty years in ministry it has been a privilege to see many small moments of transformation.

I have seen young offenders turn their lives around. After a time imprisoned for manslaughter, one transformed himself into a fire fighter. I watched another young man who had to be so tough in front of his peers, but once the front door was closed, he cooked huge pots of soup and other meals and could be found at the sewing machine making things. Transformation is possible even in seemingly impossible situations, especially when young people know they are loved, accepted and not judged.

I watched a friend of mine who is an asylum seeker transform her life once she begun to paint again. She works hard so she can study at her arts course. She has transformed canvas and paints into works of art, one of which hangs in my office. On Christmas

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Island her painting transformed many, giving them a little bit of delight whilst they relived traumatic experiences and waited to be brought to Australia. Her art and its beauty is transformative to many.

I once worked with a World War 11 veteran who was an angry alcoholic. He hated the church, so visiting him was interesting. After he got over the fact that women could be ministers, we got on quite well and I visited him weekly. In that time, he shared with me the war memories he was troubled by and his anger at God, for allowing such atrocities, especially to children, to happen. We spoke a lot about that anger, and I hope I helped him see that it was okay to be angry about such things, and that God was big enough to take it. After about six months he became very ill and ended up in hospital and then in nursing care. I went to visit him and asked him how he was, he simply said he had made his peace, he died a few days later. Transformed from an angry man to a man at peace, knowing that God loved and accepted him, flaws and all.

Life is full of transformations, but so is death.

Many years ago, I was sitting with my aunt who was dying, she was scared stiff. She asked me to pray for her, the prayer her father had taught her – I didn't know what that was, so I just prayed the Lord's Prayer, she asked me to continue to pray and as I did, she stopped gripping my hand so tightly as she moved from fear to acceptance. Similarly, when my mother was dying, she moved from severe agitation to quiet acceptance as Psalms were read to her and Peter Roberts played the harp for her.

In the bible reading today I also see transformations – transformations in the lives of a desperate mother, Jesus and a little sick girl. James also reminds us of the way in which God transform ones understanding of the world, in fact how God turns the world upside down. He implores us to transform the worlds ways to God's ways – where they poor are treated with dignity, where we do not play favourites.

In Mark's story we have a very desperate woman, at her wits end and looking for a way to help her daughter. She approaches Jesus, I guess, believing he could transform the situation. Jesus response to her is beyond rude. It is even worse in Matthew's version, where we are told she is ignored, pushed aside and insulted. Yet she persists. She challenges Jesus's response to her and dares to argue back, to help him see his insensitivity. To challenge him to live up to all he had claimed about himself, live up to his name and the expectations of him. Her courage leads to transformation not just for her daughter but also for Jesus. Her life too is transformed for the better as her daughter is made whole and she finds herself being taken seriously.

Jesus for his part, is stopped in his tracks, his demeanour changes, he can no longer ignore this woman. He is forced to look at himself and how much he was trapped in his own culture, to examine his prejudices. Then he changes course, he is transformed. Transformed by the courage and persistence of a foreign woman.

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And of course, the life of the young girl is transformed by this interaction as she is made well.

Transformation, it seems to me, needs a number of things.

Courage – courage to seek change, courage to ask for change, courage to stand up for another, courage to accept we are not always right.

Openness – openness to hear our need for change, openness to let God and others speak to us, openness to really listen, openness to really examine our own prejudice.

Encouragement – like my war veteran, encouragement to explore our feelings, to name that which makes us uncomfortable. Encouragement like Peter Roberts provided for my mother, that all will be okay.

Humility – like Jesus we need the humility to accept the challenge of others, to listen to the truth coming from unexpected places.

Determination and Hard Work – as my asylum seeker friend shows me, transformation might mean finding opportunities to follow your dream whilst working hard to make that happen. It means being willing to do the hard work and being really determined.

And of course:

Love and acceptance – my young offender friends changed, when they knew people actually cared about them, believed in them, wanted the best for them, loved them enough to put boundaries around them and ultimately did not judge them.

As we move toward the future, I find myself thinking about the transformation a social housing project on site might offer us. Providing housing to the needy. People gathering. Opportunities to share God's love with others. Opportunities to run cafes and the like to give employment to those who need it. The possibilities are endless, the transformation endless.

As I think about transformation, I find myself remembering the children's story – 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar' and the transformation the caterpillar undergoes until becoming a beautiful butterfly. Richard Bach once wrote "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls the butterfly."

As you look around at nature at this time of the year may you ponder the way in which God is continuing to shape and transform you. Amen.