

Transformation: From This to That
March 26, 2017
John 9:1-42
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I believe in transformation. I've seen it again and again. God transforms people. God transformed my friend Bob Geissler. Here's his story. Bob Geissler was a dentist in Eau Claire; until, in his mid-fifties, he was up on a ladder trimming a tree and he fell. His spinal cord injury meant he'd never walk again. He didn't particularly like his new identity – a man in a wheelchair. At least that's how other people saw him. Except that he wasn't a dentist anymore (everyone except the students at the University). When he started taking classes, to retool himself for a new career, the other students at UW Eau Claire took him at face value. He wasn't a man in a wheelchair. He was Bob, a fellow student. Though Bob had been a church-goer his whole life, he now had a new interest in spirituality. He explored an eclectic assortment of spiritual different ways of meditating and praying. Soon Bob began his new career in hospital chaplaincy. He connects with patients easily, especially those confronting similar challenges. Bob was my chaplain colleague at Luther Hospital in Eau Claire for several years. When I had moved away from the area, and came back to visit, seeing Bob, it's clear his transformation was continuing. He looked even healthier, more alive and vibrant than before. Bob said to me "you don't have to get old, and then get sick, and then you die." That was Bob's witness. "You don't have to get old, and then get sick, and then you die." Telling that story to others was part of Bob's transformation.

He had learned to tell his story – how God transformed him from a dentist to a man in a wheelchair to a child of God, to one who was serious about prayer and meditation into a hospital chaplain; and finally into someone who was more vibrant, more alive, more fully alive in Christ. The stories we tell and retell are part of our transformation. We see this in the story of the man born blind from John chapter 9. The disciples drew Jesus' attention to the beggar calling out for help. They did not see not a person but saw an occasion for theological discussion. In Biblical times it was thought that illness was God's punishment for sin. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Neither Jesus replied and he quickly gets to the business of healing. There's spit and mud involved, and instructions that he go and wash in the pool of Siloam. Then Jesus disappears from the story and does not reappear until verse 35. He tells his story about what happened to him. The beggar can now see, but that's just the beginning of his transformation. Watch how the names he uses for Jesus change, along with the three groups of people interrogating him. The first are the townspeople. "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" They can't agree. "How were your eyes opened?" "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes and said to me "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight." That's the story he tells to the townspeople.

Next the Pharisees question him. They demand to know what happened that Sabbath day (when work of any kind is forbidden). "This man is not from God, for he does not

observe the Sabbath. How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” Turning to the beggar they say “what do you say about him?” The beggar replied, “He is a prophet.” First he was Jesus – now he is a prophet.

Next the parents are consulted. The Pharisees go to the man’s parents and demand to know, “If your son was born blind, how is it that he can now see?” They refuse to answer. They are afraid if they credit Jesus with the healing they will be thrown out of the synagogue. “Let our son speak for himself. He’s old enough!” The Pharisees find the son who gives this witness: “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know: I was blind now I see.” The Pharisees insist this man couldn’t be from God. The beggar replied, “Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” The Pharisees reply, “You who were blind think you can teach us!” And they drive him out of the synagogue.

Now Jesus re-appears. When he hears the man has been thrown out of the synagogue, Jesus goes searching for him. When he finds him, he asks this question: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” “Who is he sir; tell me so that I may believe in him.” “You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he.” “Lord, I believe” and he worshipped him. Do you see how the beggar has been transformed as his story is told and retold. At first the beggar called the man healing him simply Jesus – then he was a prophet – next a man sent from God, and now he is LORD, the one who is to be worshipped. He could not explain his transformation any more than the disciples could explain why the man was born blind. All he did was tell them about what Jesus had done. As he gave his witness, the man who had been born blind was being transformed into a disciple of Jesus Christ.

God is the agent of transformation. Our lives can be transformed as we cooperate with God through witness – through writing and telling – through re-writing and re-telling -- the story of what God is doing in our lives. Up until that Sabbath, the story of his life was that he was a blind beggar; end of story. As he tells and retells his story about what Jesus had done for him, he is transformed. After Bob Geissler, the dentist, began spending more time with God he developed a wide array of spiritual practices, as he shared with others what God had done for him, Bob was transformed. He wasn’t a man in a wheelchair anymore. He was someone who radiated the presence and power of God.

God transforms people. That is our theme in Lent. We started on March 5th hearing about how God’s desire is that we reach maturity – the full measure of the stature of Christ – reach fulfillment in Greek our “*telieos*.” We do this by cooperating with what God is already doing in us. Next the story of Nicodemus showed that by taking action like Nicodemus did – speaking up for Jesus among the other Pharisees, going with Joseph of Arimathea to retrieve Jesus’ body after the crucifixion – when we take action in response to God’s grace, then we transform the world around us. All our discipleship takes place within the larger context of the building up of the kingdom of God. Last week in the story of the woman at the well we explored how transformation happens as we learn how not to resist God’s movement in our lives. “Seeing the presence of Christ in the present moment is the way to transformation,” writes David Frenette. “Just say, ‘Here he comes!’

I embrace him hidden in this trial, this dreadful person, this stomach ache, this overwhelming joy.” Today what I hope you will take away from this sermon is this: If you want your life to be transformed, then one thing you can do is change the story you tell. As you tell, and retell – your story of what God has done and is doing in your life, the world will be transformed! This story we tell is our witness. In 2008, General Conference of the United Methodist church changed the membership vows and added the word witness to what people promise when they join the church. We promise to read: to faithfully participate in the ministries of the church through our prayers, presence, gifts service and witness. Our witness is not an explanation of how we’ve changed – it’s simply telling the story of what God has done, what God is doing. The formerly blind man’s witness was telling people about the man who healed him: Jesus, a prophet, a man sent by God, the Son of Man, and finally LORD, the one worthy of worship and praise. Through a career change and spiritual growth in mid-life, Bob Geissler’s witness was “You don’t have to get old, and sick, and then you die.” God changed me and God can change you too.

Some people here today long for a transformation of a personal kind. It may be a change that sometimes feels just beyond our grasp. For some there is a deeply felt need to change the world. Maybe it’s both. It just may be that a barrier in your transformation process is your need to retell, or reshape your story. Is part of your story: I can never change? I’m too old? There’s no hope for me, for my situation? I can’t fix what’s wrong with me? If so, here is the good news: you can change the story you tell. As you learn to tell and retell the story of what God has done, what God is doing in your life, what you trust God will do in the future, then the world around you will be transformed.

What is the story you are telling about what God has done in your life? What is your witness? Do you need to retell your story? Maybe you telling your story is exactly what someone else needs for their own transformation. We become disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. God is transforming the world through us.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.