

“Signs of a Transformed Church”

Matthew 18:21-35

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In my closet at home, there is a nifty, summer weight suit from Brooks Brothers. I bought it 10 years ago when my brother, Bob, worked at Brooks Brothers as an accountant. I got the 20% employee discount. It is a lovely suit, very comfortable. The trouble is I have grown and it has not! Where I was once a 34, I'm now a 40! I can tell you there's no turning back! I haven't taken the suit to the Goodwill Store because it reminds me of my brother and of a time when I was younger and more athletically fit. It plays a nostalgic role in my life but not a functional role. I've actually tried to pawn it off on my three sons, but they are not interested in a suit that belongs in a museum.

I offer my Brooks Brothers suit as a symbol for church transformation. Sometimes, churches grow and change and what used to fit quite well in the past begins to feel tight and constricting and not life-affirming. Every church probably has at least one Brooks Brothers suit in its closet. From time to time, a church family does well to talk about the suits in the closet and what to do with the ones that don't hang like they used to. That is what we are doing, very intentionally, this fall. That is what the cottage meetings are all about.

As I worked with the “forgiveness” passage from Matthew's Gospel this week, I found myself trying to imagine two expressions on Peter's face, one before the conversation with Jesus, and one after. Approaching Jesus with his question, “How many times must I forgive somebody, as many as seven times? I picture Peter with a kindly, generous expression on his face.

But, upon hearing Jesus' reply, "as many as seventy times seven times" I picture Peter's face taking on a look of utter astonishment. It's the look of one who has had an encounter with God! Peter had done his own private calculating. Using fingers on two hands, he reached the conclusion that forgiving his brother or his sister seven times would be plenty. But he has an encounter with Jesus and Jesus has a whole different way of calculating the value of forgiveness. Peter walks away from this encounter stunned. His head is reeling. His heart is pounding. He is being transformed.

A transformed church is a congregation where week after week the worship hour, in one way or another, is an encounter with God. It may be the music; it may be the silence. It may be the preaching; it may be the teaching. It may be the banner; it may be the flame that burns as a witness for those in the military. It may be the words for children; it may be the prayers. It may be the Bible; it may be the hymnal. It may be the waters of baptism; it may be the bread of communion. The world today is hungry for meaningful encounters with God. Churches who seek to provide such opportunities are churches in the midst of a holy transformation. They are New Testament churches.

They are churches where people, like Peter, move from 'having it all figured out' (1,2,3,4,5,6,7) to people who open themselves to the way God is figuring it out. Not seven times, but seventy times seven times! Aha! Aha!

I once asked the members of a search committee to tell me how they knew they had worshiped when the service was over. What was it that needed to happen in those 60 plus minutes to know they had had an encounter with God?? An elderly physician said, "When I come to church, I set my black bag down in the aisle. When I go to pick it up again, I hope it will be a lighter load to carry."

I didn't end up being his minister, but I came away sobered by the high expectation that people bring for the kind of divine encounter that lightens a person's burden. Churches that are tasting the sweetness of transformation are the churches where people talk about what makes for a Divine encounter.

A second sign of a church in the midst of a glorious transformation is a church where the members and friends are learning to receive. I know it says somewhere in the Bible, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' I, myself, was raised on that philosophy. But I must say that churches have elevated that one verse onto a high pedestal where it doesn't always belong. I say this because what I know is that none of us has anything to give until we have first received.

When Peter approaches Jesus with his famous question about how many times one is to forgive a brother or a sister, he seems to be fishing for what his obligation might be, as if he is motivated by obligation rather than by something more personally meaningful. What's my obligation? That's the gist of Peter's question.

But Jesus comes at it in a whole different way. He sidesteps the 'obligation' mentality. He's just not into doing things based on what's expected or based on the way we've always done it. When Jesus replies, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven times", he is hinting that there is a better way to think about forgiveness. Peter thinks of forgiveness in terms of being a giver of it. I think Jesus is challenging Peter to first imagine being a receiver of forgiveness, a recipient of grace. For once a person has been on the receiving end of grace, then that person is graceful, grace-filled, and now that person has something truly worth giving. And it's no longer a question of obligation, but now it's a question of being free to forgive what I had not thought possible, free to forgive in ways that will deepen my own faith,

in ways that will heal the universe. When I forgive as one who has been forgiven, seventy times seven times begins to make sense!

I want Peter to be a member of South Church. I want him to chair the transformation committee because he is motivated by what he has received rather than by what he 'should' do or 'ought' to do. A transformed church positions itself humbly, poised for receiving what God bestows. For it is in receiving that we then have something of real value to give. I suppose that sounds rather simplistic, but when we look back over the history of the Protestant work ethic, we see that we staunchly resist the idea of receiving. Sometimes I think this is why our churches celebrate Communion only monthly or even quarterly, because the sacrament places us in a position of receiving what God has to give. And we're a little uptight about receiving. Churches that are tasting the sweetness of transformation are the churches where giving flows out of an acknowledgment that we have, indeed, received.

A third sign of a transformed church is a congregation where the beliefs and the behaviors are well integrated. Where the merger of believe and behavior is well tended, Churches thrive. It is like the right tree planted in the right soil in the right climate. Churches that fail to tend to this merger of belief and behavior invite confusion and disillusion.

Let me use the architecture of our church to illustrate this point. Historically, this church has believed in the authority of the Bible and of the proclamation of the Biblical truth. So, where is the pulpit? Where is the Bible? Right here! Front and center, even a bit elevated! Belief and practice are melded into one. It feels right to us.

Historically, this church has believed that God wants us to be in the world, transforming the world; not isolated from the plight of our neighbors. So, the windows are crystal clear.

No stained glass. No attempt to shelter ourselves from the fire alarm or the ambulance siren, no attempt to blind ourselves to the human drama unfolding all around. Belief and practice are melded into one. It feels right to us.

Historically, this congregation has believed that our basic identity is given to us in the waters of baptism. Those sacred waters sprinkled liberally over the head tell us we are God's sons and daughters. That identity is so central to our life journey. So where is the baptismal font? It's in a place where we see it every time we enter the sanctuary. If it were tucked away in a closet, there would be a disconnect between belief and behavior. So it is here where we all can see it and be reminded of our place in God's family. It feels good.

A church open to transformation is a church always looking for ways to merge the two: theology and praxis, belief and conduct.

Since the early 1960's, South Church has claimed to be a congregation that hears God's call for justice and acts to do something about that call. In 1988, we heard God's call to become more radically inclusive, so we took the action of becoming an Open and Affirming church. In 1977, we heard God's call to be much more compassionate with families suffering with mental illness, so we took the action of creating the Inter-Community Mental Health Association. In 1989, we heard God's call to provide adequate housing to those who lived in shanties, and in that year we sent our first youth mission trip to Philadelphia with Habitat for Humanity. In 2004, we heard God calling us to offer health benefits to full-time employees of the church, and we acted to provide access to that basic health resource.

Now we are hearing God calling us to remove those physical barriers, those stairs that make it hard if not impossible for some of us to attend a Bible study in the Fellowship Room or an adult discussion in the Library or a church school class in the B Wing. God is still calling us to merge belief and practice, theology and architecture. Churches tasting the sweetness of God's transforming power are the ones intent on breaching the gap.

The suit from Brooks Brothers is not the only suit in my closet. I have a blue blazer that fits quite well! I have my eye on a winter suit in Filene's Basement. I'm waiting for the sales! We all change and grow. It is inevitable. Indeed, it is a blessing! Churches are the same way. Our work is to be conscious of the growing and responsive what hangs in the closet.

I offer this sermon, and look forward to the three cottage meetings in the greatest of hope! Amen!