

New Ways of Understanding

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
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Text: John 9: 1-11

I have to admit that when I first read the scripture for today, I was pretty happy that it did not involve any plagues, or persecutions. And, I was fairly glad that it did not ask me to explain the transfiguration of Christ, even as much as I enjoyed working to understand those texts and to share thoughts about them with you. As I was reading, I thought, "Great, a passage that I know, one that I learned as a child. It's a miracle story that many people know and love, and it's one of those passages that can in some ways be easily applied to our lives."

Yet, as I prepared for today, I realized that as much as I love this passage, I have a problem with it. That problem all stems from a friend of mine who happens to have been born blind. To be honest, I never thought about what this story would mean or how it would feel to someone born unable to see. I failed to grasp the hurtful assumptions that this story asserts about people who are blind (or who have other forms of disability for that matter). My friend has been an inspiration for me at school. She has been one who shares tremendous wisdom and understanding and an incredible sense of humor. She also happens to be one of those people who knows a little something about nearly everything that I might have a question about. She is a woman who deeply loves and deeply examines her faith, and a woman who expresses her faith in love and humor in a way that draws people into her beauty. Yet, on more than one occasion, people have tried to cure my friend so that she might truly know and understand the presence of Christ. And many times has she felt alienated from the church when people have equated her physical blindness with spiritual unknowing. In fact, many times, people have assumed that given the chance, she would want to see. This just isn't the case. So, out of respect for my friend, this sermon will not be about how we are all blind, because we are not. And out of respect for my friend, I will try to offer to you what she would consider a "good sermon" on this passage, one that skips the hurtful metaphor, but not its deep meaning. In doing so, I hope that I might become more aware of how often I use metaphors that serve to alienate my sisters and brothers. I also hope that such a sermon might call us to be more mindful of the many times that our tradition calls people to "new ways of seeing," when in actuality the tradition means to call people to "new ways of understanding" and "new ways of being."

So, then, how to preach a sermon on the curing of a blind man in the Gospel of John without using the metaphor of blindness and sight. This is bit of a conundrum, I'll admit. In attempting to do so, I can only begin with what I consider to be the deeper meaning in the text. In the Gospel of John, this metaphor of blindness and sight is used time and time again to speak about how to understand and interpret the presence of Jesus. It is a metaphor that called the people in early Christian communities to reexamine their traditional understandings of God. And I believe that if we choose to translate the term sight into understanding, that we take the first step toward getting to the passage's deeper meaning.

Last week, Jessica talked to our Lenten study group about some of the original practices of Lent. Lent, she told us was a time of preparation for baptism in the early church (and still is in some churches). It was a time of penitence and prayer, of longing for right relationship with God. In many ways, it was a conscious entering into the depths of inadequacy so that one might experience God's grace. It was a time of instruction, and a time of understanding, a time of finding out what was pleasing to the God. This preparation culminated in baptism and communion, and with membership in the church. Easter was an emerging from the depths with new understanding, and with new life. It was a time of coming back from the pool of Siloam changed in self understanding, and changed in one's understanding of Jesus. Lent was a time of journeying toward that understanding, a time of transformation and change.

Since we are now beginning the fourth week of Lent, I couldn't help but put this concept of understanding from our reading in the Gospel of John in the context of our Lenten journey. It is nearly half way to the time of emerging now. And, if we consider this a time of transformation and change, where are we in our understanding? Do you feel yourself moving and changing? Are you ready to re-emerge as our Lenten tradition would have us, with new understanding and new life?

I am hoping that you're not, because I'm not. I must admit, it's been taking time and thought and effort to get me in gear this Lenten season. Change and understanding don't always come so easily. In fact, it may be difficult to expect them to fit neatly into this forty day package at all. They are activities that require hard work and uncertainty, and unfortunately, they often find themselves on the Lenten list of things to do when they should be in our weekly calendars. Yet, this forty days is a time to remind ourselves, and to recommit ourselves to the business of growing and changing in our lives and in our faith.

The youth of our church have been sharing symbols of Lent with us during this season. For me, there is no more poignant a symbol of change and transformation than the butterfly. For a while now, I've been a big fan of butterflies. I'm not sure exactly when it started. It could have been when my mom gave me the book *Hope for the Flowers* which tells of the lives of two caterpillars in

their journey of transformation. It could have been when I went to school in Santa Barbara and the monarchs would migrate south along the coast. They would spend a couple of days in the eucalyptus groves near my campus and turn the trees orange when they slept. It could have been when my grandma died, and I was given a coat of hers that had butterfly patches on the collar. They are on my backpack now, and they often remind me of the changes that she endured especially at the end of her life. At summer camp, I was led up a path by a butterfly, who preceded to land on me to let me know that we had reached the place where we were supposed to be.

For me, butterflies are a strong symbol of transformation that we can draw upon not only at Easter as we often do, but also in the season of Lent. And especially as I think about it today, it's not just the butterfly that speaks. It's the whole package; the caterpillar, the cocoon, the struggling to emerge, the fragility as well as what we most often believe to be the beautiful result. I see the final product of the butterfly as really only a small part of the process. Butterflies represent all that goes into that change and transformation, not just the result. They represent a time of gradually becoming. For, Lent is a time to admit that there is more understanding that we need to attain, that there is change that we wish for within ourselves. We are the caterpillar who is born and growing. Also, I think this time of Lent can be the wonderful impetus for change, that nudge that helps us realize our capacity for becoming. We are the caterpillar who realizes that she can spin. This Lenten journey can be a time of incredible fear and uncertainty. Change is not easy, like I said. How will we know what we will become if we find ourselves bound and still, unable to do and be what we once were? We are the one enveloped in that place of uncertainty. And there is also that time when we can stand it no longer, when we must kick and fight and develop muscles that we never knew we had. For, truly we are the newly born one. There are so many ways of being in this transformation, this time of questioning who we are and who we are becoming in our understanding. And there are so many more questions that come when we willingly enter into this time of change. As we change, who are we in relation to ourselves and to our families and communities? Who are we in relation to our faith, our God, to Christ? Where are we in our capacity to love and forgive ourselves and others, and to accept forgiveness from others? Where are we as we consider what it means to be forgiven by God?

These are all questions that come up for me when I consider our place in this Lenten journey. When I say that I hope that you aren't ready to emerge to new understanding and new life, I only make such a statement hoping that we all need more understanding, that we all continually need spiritual transformation. Just as the meaning in our metaphor from the gospel suggests, I hope that we are able to willingly grow and change in spite of the pain that such change might bring to our lives. I hope that we are willing to try to share with others our new understanding, just as the man in John tried to do when people did not recognize him.

This is where our Lenten journey leads us, up the path to where we are supposed to be. Whether this place is one of realization, of spinning the cocoon, of being enveloped by it, or of breaking forth with full force into a new way of understanding, we are in the time of becoming. So, I hope that you are not ready to emerge just yet. We still have time to think about the places where we need more understanding. We still have three weeks until Easter right? And we have the rest of our lives. Like the man in the Gospel of John, we are in the business of figuring out what new understanding will mean for us, what this will mean for us in our relationships, and what this will mean for us in our understanding of our God.