

To See All Things For What They Are

Jesus climbs the mountain with Peter and James and John, and is visibly transformed before them. Moses climbs Mount Sinai to receive the law...when he returns he is literally glowing, he is shining so much that he must put a veil over himself so that the people don't freak out.

We might say that that kind of holiness is just fine for Jesus and Moses, but do we really believe that such transformation is possible for the rest of us? Is transfiguration a nice inspirational story, or is it at the heart of what it means to be fully human?

The truth is that God made us for this. But let's talk a bit about how we begin to get there. This kind of profound change isn't only for the saints and the patriarchs. Nor is this simply about suddenly becoming *more holy*, in some instantaneous moment of divine favor. Transfiguration is a part of becoming fully *human*, of becoming who God created us to be, of enfolding the mystery of God into our own human, yet sacred, lives.

When Archbishop Rowan Williams addressed a synod of Catholic bishops in 2012 he talked about how *contemplation* is at the heart of transformation. He said that "contemplation is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics", and "to put it boldly," he says, "contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit."ⁱ

Both Jesus and Moses climbed the holy mountains, and both were changed. Yet both also spent time during these journeys in a state of prayerful contemplation. Moses was silent for days before his first encounter with God, and Jesus upon reaching the height of the mountain began to pray.

These stories cannot be told without silence. Silence is, of course, hard to come by in our world. I find that deeply troubling. Our souls need time to turn off the noise of our world and to be with God, and indeed to listen to God (who sometimes, if we're really quiet and really paying attention, might actually tell us something we didn't already know). But the key phrase is *paying attention*. Contemplation trains us to pay attention.

Contemplation means many things, the most obvious one being contemplative practice, meditation and prayer, intentional practices of silence. But I realize that going off on meditation retreats is not realistic for many of us. That's why I think

that a good start is simply learning to pay attention, learning to notice and listen for God, finding a disciplined practice that helps you to not to be more like God, but to become more human. And to recognize the holiness in that.

Contemplation, you see, is the root of meaningful change. And change is the thing we want most but work hardest to prevent. Perhaps you've noticed that we don't really like to change. What's more, while we don't like to change, we *really* don't like to see other people change if we ourselves are un-transformed.

If you are courageous enough to step away from the noise of the world even for 10 or 15 minutes a day, I promise that you will meet resistance. You will encounter resistance from the 24-hour-a-day noise machine that demands your attention and your energy. As you begin to experience this change, you will meet the resistance of friends and family members who haven't done their own work, and if you change, they'll fear that they might lose you. As you undertake a journey of transformation, and this saddens me, you might even meet resistance from your church (if the church itself hasn't done *its* own work.) Archbishop Williams said:

What people of all ages recognize in these practices is the possibility, quite simply, of living more humanly – living with less frantic acquisitiveness, living with space for stillness, living in the expectation of learning, and most of all, living with an awareness that there is a solid and durable *joy* to be discovered in the disciplines of self-forgetfulness that is quite different from the gratification of this or that impulse of the moment.”ⁱⁱ

Unless the church lives in this place, though,

It will run the risk of trying to sustain faith on the basis of an un-transformed set of human habits – with the all too familiar result that the church comes to look unhappily like so many purely human institutions, anxious, busy, competitive and controlling.ⁱⁱⁱ

So what is contemplation, exactly? It is certainly meditation and practices of intentional silence. It is time to write or create, if you are so inclined. It is prayer and study, whether the daily office, forward day by day (which I understand now comes in [a new smartphone app](#)), daily scripture readings, or books about the spiritual life. It can be a walk in the park or time in your garden.

Contemplation is ultimately about finding in the generous gift of silence the ability to see, and therefore to live, differently. It's as much about what we *learn*

to see as it is about how we pray. Rowan Williams reminds us that that
 “Contemplation is an intrinsic element in this transforming process. To learn to look at God without regard to my own instant satisfaction, to learn to scrutinize and to relativize the cravings and fantasies that arise in me – this is to allow God to be God, and to allow the prayer of Christ, God’s own revelation to God, to come alive in me.”^{iv}

“I discover,” he writes (and this is my favorite part), “*how to see other persons and things for what they are in relation to God, not do me.*”^v Who does that? Who lives like that? The answer is, those who have learned to find that powerful still point within, those whose prayer and practice has refined the way they see and love and move about the world. That is what transfiguration look like.

Moses’s time of prayer and silence in the presence of Yahweh resulted in the law: an entirely new way of living as the People of God. Talk about innovation. Yet when he returned, he had to wear that veil. What would it mean for us to reflect that same Glory, and to even do so with the veil off? For the truest expression of our being to radiate both praise and love? That, too, is the work of contemplation. Williams writes,

To be contemplative as Christ is contemplative is to be open to all the fullness that the Father wishes to pour into our hearts. With our minds made still and ready to receive, with our self-generated fantasies about God and ourselves reduced to silence, we are at last at the point where we may begin to grow. And the face we need to show to our world is the face of a humanity in endless growth towards love, a humanity so delighted and engaged by the glory of what we look towards that we are prepared to embark on a journey without end.^{vi}

Reduced to stillness and silence, we are at last ready to grow. We are at last free to love the world that God created, not for what it can do for us, but for the sake of its intrinsic one-ness with God. When we are changed, we are free. This, in the words of St. Paul, is *our* transfiguration, our unveiled faces reflecting the glory of the Lord.^{vii}

Homily for August 6, The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, The Transfiguration, St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina.

ⁱ Williams, Rowan. *The Archbishop of Canterbury's Address to the Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*. October 10, 2012. Paragraph 8.

<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/>.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., Paragraph 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid., Paragraph 10.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid., Paragraph 6.

^{vii} 2 Corinthians 3.18, referenced by Archbishop Williams in Paragraph 6.