

## Life-Changing Spirit

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany  
Transfiguration Sunday  
Holy Communion  
March 3, 2019

“And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” – 2 Corinthians 3:18

I imagine that most of us, when we say the word “Lord,” are referring to one of the first two persons of the Trinity – God the Creator or Jesus the Christ. And there's a very good reason for this. The Old Testament refers to God as “the LORD” about 7,000 times, and the New Testament refers to Jesus as Lord over 700 times. And we've heard American evangelicals refer to conversion as “coming to the Lord” or “accepting Jesus Christ as your lord and savior” so often that those expressions have almost become religious clichés.

So when Paul writes to the Christians at Corinth that the gradual transformation of our lives into Christians “comes from the Lord, the Spirit,” we might want to pause a moment and ponder the implications. I believe Paul is telling us something important about our faith, which is that we become Christians not because of God the Creator – Jews and Muslims share that God with us, but not our faith – nor by Jesus – whose story is more widely known than any other person's and yet there are plenty of people who've heard of Jesus but aren't Christians – but rather through the work of God's Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit, that third person of the Trinity, who makes not only Jesus Lord but also God the Creator. It's the Spirit who makes the other persons of the Trinity who they are. Or we might say that it's the Spirit who makes God, in every form, a living reality. It's the Spirit who changes lives.

I've often thought that when we talk with young people about God in confirmation classes, we should start with the Holy Spirit, because those young people are old enough to recognize that it's spiritual, rather than physical realities that shape our existence as mature people.

When you're little, the world is nothing more than physical. Babies have no awareness of anything beyond their physical appetites, and all of us who love them are there, from their perspective, to satisfy their desires for food, warmth, and clean diapers. Babies want us, but they don't love us, not yet. Love is a spiritual reality that isn't hardwired into babies. It isn't hardwired into any of us, and one of the great tragedies of life is that some people never develop that spiritual reality that we call love, that the New Testament calls God.

There's a movie out in theaters just now called “Can You Ever Forgive Me?” which is the true story of Lee Israel's forging and selling of over 400 letters of famous literary people, people like Dorothy Parker and Noel Coward and Louise Brooks. In the movie, which is based on the 2008 memoir Israel wrote about that period in her life, there is a scene in which she says in open court, as she's about to be sentenced for her crimes, that the only thing she thought she ever truly loved was her cat. And from Melissa McCarthy's portrayal of Israel, it's quite possible that she was right.

One person walks through Euclid Creek Reservation and sees nature all around them; I walk the same path and I see creation – what's the difference? The difference is the Holy Spirit, who has shaped my reality in such a way that I see creation, and not nature or the environment, all around me and within me. I am part of that creation, which was created by a creator – it didn't just bang itself into existence like a screen door.

That shaping of a person's reality is the work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes one person experience her life as a blessed part of God's glorious creation, while another person experiences his life as a random accident of nature or the environment. One person finds meaning and purpose and comfort and encouragement in the religious expression of her faith, while another person couldn't care less about religion and its trappings. Why is that? It's because of the Holy Spirit, which changes and then shapes a person's perspective on her life and on all of life.

You and I have been led to believe since the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that we are self-determining creatures, that our free will allows us to use our minds in such a way as to make those choices that will determine who we are. We westerners tend to think of ourselves as the products of our reason and our rational thoughts.

But there is quite a bit of evidence to suggest that we're not nearly as free as we think we are. Lots of things are given to us in our genes over which we have no control, and lots more things are given to us by our environment about which we are almost never conscious. Those gifts are powerful determinants of who we are.

Yesterday, the Writers' Circle took as a source of our writing prompts Paul's famous list in Philippians 4. Paul's wrapping up this relatively brief letter to that congregation and he says, “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable – if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise – think about these things. Keep on doing the things you have learned and heard and received – and seen in me – and the God of peace will be with you” (8-9).

As we know all too well from our present moment, it is no easy matter for us to agree on what is true. Or honorable. Or just. Or pure. Or lovely. Or commendable. Did Kim Jong Un know of Otto Warmbier's treatment while he was in North Korean custody? He says he did not. President Trump says he takes Kim at his word. Some experts in totalitarian regimes say that Kim's disavowal cannot be true. About what are we to think when there are conflicting versions of the truth? Do we just arbitrarily pick our version and go with it? Why does this version seem like a plausible explanation to some of us while, to others of us, it seems like a blatant distortion or disregard for the facts?

Another of the topics that emerged during yesterday's meeting of the Writers' Circle is paradoxes or dichotomies. Why does life seem to include so many things that are both true and not true? Do you really find your life by losing it, as our Christian faith teaches, or are you just a sucker? Are we fools for Christ's sake, as Paul described himself (1 Cor. 4:10), or are we just plain fools?

The answer to those kinds of questions depends on the Holy Spirit. The Spirit opens the eyes and minds and hearts of some to see God's wisdom in the midst of the world's foolishness, while that same Spirit appears to be absent in the lives of others. We don't know why that is because the Spirit, as Paul says, is Lord, and we're not. The Spirit is sovereign, which means that it controls us and we don't control it.

“The wind blows wherever it pleases,” Jesus told Nicodemus. “You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that we cannot will ourselves to be born again. We cannot will our spiritual rebirth. We are not born of the Spirit because we will to be born of the Spirit, just as we are not born of our earthly parents because we will to be born of them. Both our physical birth and our spiritual rebirth are gifts of the Spirit, to be received gratefully and lived joyously. The Spirit, the Lord, is sovereign.

Today in the church's calendar is Transfiguration Sunday, so named because of the story of Jesus' transfiguration. The vast majority of stories about Jesus in the gospels make him the subject, rather than the object, of the action: the adolescent Jesus astonishes the doctors of the law in the temple; Jesus restores Jairus' daughter to life; Jesus feeds five thousand with just a bit of food. And so forth.

In today's story, however, Jesus doesn't transfigure – he is transfigured. He is the object of the action, rather than the subject of the action – he is the acted upon rather than the actor. As far as his disciples can tell, the appearance of his face and clothing changed, and Moses and Elijah appeared to be talking with him.

And what those great prophetic figures from the Old Testament are speaking with Jesus about, Luke and Luke alone tells us, is “his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem” (9:31).

All three of the synoptic evangelists tell us that Moses and Elijah conversed with Jesus during his transfiguration, but only Luke says what it was they were talking about: his crucifixion. And not only does Luke tell us that they were talking about Jesus' death, but he calls it an accomplishment: “which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem.”

What a strange word to use of Jesus' crucifixion! In our minds, accomplishments are always positive – we finish a course of study with an A, we complete a complicated woodworking project in the basement, we bake the mother of all wedding cakes. Those we think of as accomplishments.

But crucifixion – who considers death by crucifixion an accomplishment? Jesus' transfiguration is the turning point in the story of his life. From this point on, we will hear more and more about his journey toward his death. We will move through the season of Lent moving closer and closer to Good Friday and, ultimately, Easter. Jesus' radiant appearance with Moses and Elijah marks the pivot into that portion of his story, because it was probably his last chance to back out.

If Luke is correct in telling us that Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus about his crucifixion, it's very likely that they were saying to him that if he continued on the trajectory he had established for his life in response to the Spirit's leading, he was going to wind up dead. The Spirit that had laid claim to him at his baptism was leading him closer and closer to the point of no return – the point of lethal conflict with the authorities that would constitute his sacrifice for the sake of his mission. If Jesus wanted to avoid that deadly confrontation, now was his chance to chart a different course.

And we know what he chose. He chose not to abandon his call. He chose to face what he knew was inevitable. He chose to sacrifice his life rather than sacrifice his divinely-given mission. He obeyed the Spirit, as he had at his baptism, and his life, again, was changed forever.

His life was changed forever, and so was ours. By obeying the Spirit's leading, Jesus showed us what it actually means to be human. He showed us what genuine obedience to the God of mercy, justice, and peace looks like. He showed us that it is humanly possible to love God above everything else and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. That's the power of a life changed by the Holy Spirit.

And that power is available to every one of us here this morning. It's available to every single person on the planet. It's there for those, like Paul, who are willing to allow the Spirit to be the lord of their lives. It's there and it's there for us. Thanks be to God.