

Matthew 5: 13-16

Expect to be Transformed

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I might have mentioned it before but I am a dedicated fan of three reality shows on TV: Survivor - which Jamie and I have watched from the very beginning; The Amazing Race – which has increased my bucket list of places I want to see around this world; and The Biggest Loser, my favorite.

The premise of the show is to help clinically obese people get back to health – physically, mentally, and spiritually. Weight loss is the ultimate goal of course. The one who loses the most percentage of weight wins: \$ 250,000.

But besides working hard the contestants are encouraged to face their demons, to figure out what caused them to gain the weight they carry around in the first place. This is where the trainers come in – not just to kick some serious “you know what,” but also to help the contestants dig deeper and pinpoint the reasons for their weight issues. When the trainers start that process, they are often met with incredible resistance. Why? Because of fear; if you have to let go of the person you think you are, the questions then is: Who am I? Or fear of failure: What if I can’t do it or gain the weight back?

As the trainers turn their attention to each and everyone, the stories that emerge are heart-breaking, and many have to do with loss: losing a parent, losing a child – one contestant lost two children and her husband in a car accident caused by a drunk driver. There is loss of confidence and hope, or loss of self by taking care of everybody else; fear of losing their own life too early.

For many of the contestants, it was loss that stopped them in their tracks, and they stopped living and started eating.

What I really love about the show is the transformation that happens to each and every person. That transformation happens because of the messages they get – happiness from their bodies as the exercise endorphins kick in, or from the successes they achieve – running their first miles without stopping or jumping over a hurdle. And then there are the messages from the trainers.

Encouragement and affirmation in the show go a very long way and, in the end, make all the difference.

It is inspiring to watch the pounds coming off, but it is even more inspiring to see how life begins again; how each person, in a way, is being reborn to a new and much happier self. It does not mean that from now on life will be easy, but now they have better tools to get through the rough times – not food.

You might be wondering where this is going. What happens in the show happens to us all more than we think. With this gift of life comes challenges, and sometimes they stop us in our tracks and knock us over, right? And what or who gets us back up? Sometimes we manage on our own, but rarely. More often than not it is the caring presence of a friend or loved one, the unexpected affirmation, or words of encouragement? And don't they make all the difference?

As Susan and I thought about this post-Easter sermon series, we chose the qualities or essence of Jesus that made him the incredible person he was, and which still inform and shape our faith as follower of Jesus today.

So I want to talk about his desire to transform – his world and the people he met along the way as he continues to transform us today. I had the hardest time zeroing in on a passage that would make that point. And after deciding against reading all four gospels to you, I picked these four little verses from the Sermon on the Mount.

Imagine for a moment with me, how the people must have heard these words: “You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world.” The people who listened to Jesus that day were of no importance to society; some, maybe, a little but the bulk of the people, nobody really cared about. Most would not be even missed if they did not show up the next day for work. There were plenty of others to take their place. They lived a meager existence, earning a day's wage that would be spent on food that same day. They were not educated. They had no chance to rise up the ranks through hard work and make something of themselves. Once a day laborer, always a day laborer until the day they died.

That kind of existence would bring even the most optimistic person down, don't you think? So again, imagine, in the midst of this hopeless, poverty-stricken existence, this Rabbi comes along and says: You are loved! You are important! You have something to contribute to this life that only you can give!

Let your light shine! Don't put it under a bushel but share it with the world! These were not just words spoken, but they were healing words, affirmative words that could turn a rotten life 360 degrees around.

It should be very clear to us that Jesus had a profound influence and effect on people. The people who encountered him were never the same again. Their life had changed forever. Those who were healed, forgiven, encouraged, and affirmed got a new lease of life.

Jesus spent his whole ministry conveying this one message: God loves you. God believes in you, believes in your capacity to become the person God created you to be. Jesus did not say this to be nice but to invoke transformation in lives stunted by the social, political, religious status quo and personal resignation. It does not mean becoming someone you are not but becoming who you genuinely are.

Jesus' objective was to call people to a new vision of the way things ought to be with themselves and with the world. He called it the Kingdom of God and he said it is "at hand," "within you," "in your midst." The only thing standing between you and its final arrival is your need for transformation.

That is essentially what our faith and the living of it is all about. Transformation is at the heart of it – spiritually, internally, personally - which I think is so much harder to understand for those of us who have grown up in and with this faith. We did not have to find it, or fight for it, really. Our baptism gained us entrance, and we kind of slid into place to please grandma and satisfy our parents. Good news is we stuck with it, for the most part. "Does it really make a difference?" we wonder? "Do we want it to make a difference?" might be the better question here.

If you were to talk to someone who found faith later while fully conscious and self-conscious, you know, a little older, or who has had an experience like Paul, getting knocked off the chariot by Jesus, you'll be surprised and maybe a little scared of the intensity of that transformation. People with that kind of transformative experience have a brand new appreciation of faith. And we are not used to this type of enthusiasm when it comes to this kind of faith.

Transformation is the heart of our faith; it is the heart of Jesus' message. You can read it into every encounter of Jesus, and in every letter Paul ever wrote. But, we might ask, transformation from what and to what and how?

The growing up process inclines us to be concerned about ourselves. We are raised to live successful, productive lives in this world; to be self-reliant, self-sufficient, and at times self-centered. This happens to all of us. This process of growing up, of finding our place in the world, does not incline us to that deep love of God and that deep love of what God loves. It actually gets us pretty far away from the center of divine love.

Along comes Jesus telling us, inviting us, challenging us to love God again, to love God more than the world; to love God again with all our heart, soul, and mind. And we are to love what God loves which is the world - not just you and me, not just Christians, not even just human beings, but the whole of creation.

The surest way to get there is through practice. Jesus spoke the invitation but it was the young Christian movement who realized that it takes practice. Loving God does not just happen. The process of becoming more and more deeply centered in God, and decisively in Jesus, requires an attention to our relationship with God. In some ways our relationship with God is like the human relationship. How does a human relationship deepen and grow? It deepens and grows by paying attention to it, spending time in it, being present to it. And so it is with our relationship with God and this process of becoming more and more deeply centered in God. It happens through the traditional practices of the Christian tradition, worship being the most important collective practice, prayer being the most widely used individual practice. Prayer and worship are not because God needs them, but they are about our path to our own transformation.

Being part of a community is essential as well. We are not gathering because God needs us to gather or Heike needs a place to go on Sunday mornings but because Christian community is a means to the end of our transformation. It is the place where we find our identity, hear our story, and tread on our common ground as Christians.

The older I get the more I realize that Christianity is not very much about believing, even though many people think of it that way. Believing, when you think about it, has very little transformative power. You can believe all the right things and still be quite untransformed. You can believe all the right things and still be mean. Rather, Christianity is about entering into this process of transformation to find the person and the people God created us to be.

Transformation is about passion. The Christian life is about passion. It's about our passion for God, and a passion for what God loves -the world- and that it be transformed in the direction of God's dream, a world of justice and peace.

I am proud to be part of a church that has so many people with passion in it. Many of you have found the thing or things that are loved by God – be it the earth and environment, working with kids, mentoring youths, preparing lunch or dinner for homeless people, knitting prayer shawls for people who are sick, having dinner with the families of Baby Basic, caring about immigration and people far away in the middle of nowhere, or raising money to update our building. I don't believe you are doing these and more just because you had nothing better to do, but these are things that fire you up, and you allow them to transform you. These are things that are an expression of your love for God and for what God loves.

We are here to make God's love real. We are here to participate in God's passion. We are called to love what God loves and then change the world.

It's as simple and challenging as that. Amen