

Devoted
Acts 2:42-47
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Transformation can be such a wonderful thing to behold. Bulbs become fragrant flowers. Tiny seeds become trees. Caterpillars turn into beautiful butterflies. Tadpoles turn to frogs. Children born on the other side of the world become part of a family in a small town in Rhode Island, and a church gets to share that blessing. Transformation can be such a wonderful thing to behold.

So it is that on this day when we have heard a story of transformation from Sydney Clays, we have a story in the Bible that tells of transformation. A group of people experience transformation in their lives. They become a community. They become a community marked by certain practices, behaviors, patterns of living. Their lives are marked by the things to which they are devoted. The things they are devoted to are a central part of the transformation. What they are becoming together is a community that loves God and loves the neighbor. They are becoming as individuals, and they are becoming together, a new creation. Old patterns are gone. New ways of living take shape. The new ways of living demonstrate a deep concern for all of life, a sharing together of resources and a sharing together of relationships, a joining together to meet needs and a joining together to grow in faith through study, prayer, fellowship, and breaking bread.

Diana Butler Bass wrote a book with a title that hints that this transformation might be something available to all of us, to ordinary people like you and like me. The book she wrote is titled, “Christianity for the rest of us.” The subtitle lets us know this is a book that focuses on changed lives. “How the neighborhood church is transforming the faith.” The main premise of the book is that as local congregations, or the neighborhood church as she puts it, focus on practices of faith these practices often lead to transformation. Individual lives are changed. The life of a congregation is changed. And although it sometimes seems a distant hope and even an impossible vision, the world is changed.

Change certainly happened in the Book of Acts. The change or transformation wasn’t magical, and the Bible doesn’t say there are four steps to spiritual growth or a path to progress, but Acts 2:42 does say the early church was devoted to certain practices, to certain patterns, to certain behaviors, and those practices were the

apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. As they were devoted to these things life around them changed. Their lives were filled with awe. God was at work in their lives through wonders and miraculous signs. One of the miraculous signs, one of the wonders, is that they were drawn together and their lives were united in deep and meaningful ways, things like sharing and caring. Their life together was shared in the normal places of worship like the temple, and their life was shared together in their homes. They experienced the deep joy of becoming a Christian community. They experienced the deep joy of new creation in Jesus Christ. Their lives were transformed.

Transformation happens in so many ways and on so many different levels. Sometimes the transformation is for a whole congregation. The Church of the Epiphany in Washington, D.C. established a worship service for the homeless population in the community around their church. They gave a name to the worship service: The Welcome Table. *“At first, those who attended Epiphany’s traditional 11:00 a.m. service simply referred to the 8:00 a.m. people as ‘the homeless.’ Gradually, however, ‘the homeless’ have become ‘guests’ and, now, in many cases, ‘homeless members,’ or ‘members who live on the streets.’ Or simply Joe, Wanda, or Ted. When the service was initiated, the liturgy included no collection because the regular churchgoers thought it inappropriate to ask guests to contribute. However, homeless members insisted that their service should include a traditional offering. They wanted to give back to the church. As the priest reported, ‘They felt like they were not real members and asked to contribute.’ Daniel, a member of the traditional congregation, recalled how moved he was the first time he acted as an usher at the homeless service: ‘As the plate passed down the rows, I watched poor people turn their pockets inside out and throw loose change and crumpled dollars in the offering. I almost cried. I learned more about giving that morning than in a thousand sermons.’”*¹

Do you get a sense of the many levels of transformation that are taking place through the worship life of this community? There is a transformation from calling people homeless, to guests, or homeless members, or members who live on the street...or simply by their names. The transformation is that these ones who really do have names want to be full members of the community. They belong, and so they want to contribute. They want the offering plate to come by them. And as these ones who might have very little give generously of the little they have, one of the members of the church watches in awe and finds his life is being transformed. A whole congregation is being transformed.

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006) 86.

Many years ago I got involved in the Disciple Bible Study. Bible study is a central part of the transformation that happens in our lives as followers of Christ. The passage in Acts says the early church devoted itself to the teaching of the apostles'. Studying God's word is so important, and the Disciple Bible Study requires some devotion. Disciple is a 34 week study that requires daily reading and preparation, a weekly meeting to discuss and share and watch a brief video lecture from a biblical scholar. But what I remember about the Disciple Bible Study is not the level of commitment required nor the time that was spent. Instead, what I remember is the transformation that happened in my life, and in the life of the others who joined in the study. Now maybe the year we did the Bible Study was unique, and that is why we experienced transformation. The Bible Study started on Wednesday, September 5. The year was 2001. Between our first study on September 5 and our second study on September 12 our nation went through the devastation of 9/11. That terrible and tragic day heightened our sense of the importance of God's word. It led us to a deeper level of devotion. The cries from the slaves in Exodus, the laments of the Psalms and Job, the heartache of the exile, and the sufferings of our Lord on the cross all took on new meaning in the shadow of 9/11.

But the transformation was more than the events of 9/11. One of the members in our study had just returned from Scotland, where her husband had been sent on a two year work assignment. No sooner did she settle in Scotland than she was diagnosed with lung cancer and returned to states for treatment. She joined our study. By November of that year she died. We shared the last two months of her life in prayer and Bible study and worship and fellowship. Being in Bible study with a person during the last two months of their life was a profound privilege.

In the Disciple Bible Study you share prayer concerns each week. Glancing through my workbook I am reminded that we were concerned not only with the events of 9/11. That was certainly a major part of our journey, but the journey included celebrations. We gave thanks for a church member named Al who had his 95th birthday. We prayed for missionaries in Guatemala. We prayed for grandchildren. We prayed for people facing illness. We prayed for our elders and deacons and leaders. We prayed for a family whose adult daughter died. We prayed for a couple who celebrated their 50th anniversary. One day I found the notes that reminded me of the day the group said prayers for my mom and dad, back when my dad was suffering the illness that would take his life. And we prayed when we completed the 34 week course. We prayed and we gathered for a small worship service where we took the bread and the cup and shared together in the Lord's Supper. Our lives were transformed because we spent that year in devoted study of God's word, praying together, growing in friendship and fellowship, and when it was all said and done breaking bread together as the Body of Christ.

I tell you about the Disciple Bible Study because this fall we are going to offer this study for our congregation. We will offer it at least twice during the week, one time during the evening and one time during the day. Transformation takes place as people are devoted to the teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayer. It doesn't have to be Disciple. There are many other studies and ways to study and times to study. It doesn't have to be Disciple Bible Study. But it might be. I love this church. I love the people of this church. I'd love to share time with you in weekly Bible study. We study the Bible not simply for the sake of studying the Bible, but we study because God works through the Bible and God works to transform our lives, to bring new creation.

This morning we have heard a tale about a tadpole being transformed into a frog. Wednesday night at Vespers we heard a story of transformation. A dear friend named Cathy stood up and told us her story. She told about being distant from God. She told about struggles to find her way in life and turning to some things that weren't helpful. Then she told about feeling a desire to seek out God. In a funny way she found our church. One of the messages she heard in our church was in the story of David as a young shepherd boy. In that story God says that he does not look at the outward appearance. She heard that God looks at the heart. She started reading the Bible. She read through the whole Bible. At one time she wondered about the meaning and purpose of her life and even faced thoughts about ending her life. Now she has hope. Before she even got up to speak I knew her words were going to touch my heart. Her message was titled, "How this church saved my life." When she finished we stood and applauded.

Transformation is beautiful. Transformation is wonderful. Transformation is what God does in our lives. He brings new creation. Today the message is not about magic words like abracadabra. Today the message is not about potions or a genie in the bottle. Today the message is that Jesus Christ is real. Jesus Christ is alive. His Spirit is with us. And in response to this living and loving God, we devote ourselves to some very important practices and habits and disciplines and behaviors. We devote ourselves to teaching, to fellowship, to prayer, and to breaking bread. As we do these things, as we devote ourselves to these things, we eagerly and expectantly wait for God to be doing the work that only God can do, transforming our lives and shaping within us, as individuals and as a community of faith, the new creation that comes through Jesus Christ.