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# ***“How Shall We Be Transformed?”***

*Rev. Dr. Sharon Rhodes-Wickett*

# How Shall We Be Transformed?

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Pent 10A

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett  
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Today's scripture texts are about transformation.

Transformation *from* what? *To* what?

We frequently use the word when describing the Christian journey of faith. The word by itself doesn't imply any particular experience or values – good or bad.

Transformers can be toys that change from a metal sports car to an iron-man superhero. They can be some kind of box thingy on electric lines that do something transformational. It can be the moment you look in the mirror and say, "Oh my gosh, when did I become my mother? or my father?"

It can be a quiet moment soaking in the beauty of God's creation and you have a moment of insight where you see your place in it all... a moment of clarity.

Maybe it was when your partner or spouse died. Maybe it was when you gave birth. Maybe it was when you were baptized...or a moment of grace when you received communion.

The texts give us insight.

I'll start with the reading from Matthew. Jesus asked the disciples "who do people say that the Chosen One is?" They reported back what the tradition says. Then Jesus shifted the question: "who do you say that I am?" Peter responded with a more personal experience: "son of the living God." The two different questions and responses show how transformation is both global and personal.

We learn from our mothers and fathers in the faith, our ancestors, but they can't substitute for our own experience. Our own experience is important, but it isn't in isolation apart from others. It is in the context of community.

John Wesley captured that idea with his four foundations for faith: Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason.<sup>1</sup> We value the sacred writings and wisdom of our faith community over the generations. They inform us. But we also need our own experience of the faith, using reason to reflect and bring perspective.

The Apostle Paul, when writing to the church at Rome, wrote this jewel of an idea: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Paul gives us much to think about in the passage. Transformation is not about following certain prescriptions for the right behavior; it's not a legalistic code that tells you how to act. Rather it is opening yourself, your mind, your heart, to the renewing work of the Spirit.

It is very easy for us to conform ourselves to the world, but conformity to the world does not lead to transformation of the mind. In fact, it leads to disappointment and emptiness.

Cultural values would have us put our faith in material things; in the stock market, in unjust economic systems that cheat workers, in believing more is better, and compulsive frenzied living that leaves us harried, hassled, numb and empty.

Catholic Priest, Professor and Spiritual guide Henri Nouwen is one of sources I turn to when I feel tempted to conform to this world and need guidance.

About 20 years ago he wrote a letter to his father 6 months after the death of his mother. The little book is called "A Letter of Consolation." <sup>ii</sup> It gives us some clues about how we may experience transformation in a more personal way, while acknowledging it is in the context of community.

In the introduction to the letter, he said that as his mother was dying, he spent time with her and his family. After her death he welcomed the community's support and love and offered the same to his family. He wrote: "And then, back in the United States, far away from home, the busy school life certainly did not encourage me to listen to my own inner cries.

"But one day, when I paused for a while in my office between appointments, I suddenly realized that I had not shed a single tear before or after mother's death. At that moment I saw that the world had such a grasp on me that it did not allow me to fully experience even the most personal, the most intimate, and the most mysterious event of my life. It seemed as if the voices around me were saying, 'You have to keep going. Life goes on; people die, but you must continue to live, to work, to struggle. The past cannot be recreated. Look at what is ahead.' I was obedient to these voices."

He then writes about his experiences of processing the loss he and his father felt. His father was a lawyer and a professor who was high-powered and put high value on his autonomy and independence. Nouwen captured what is, for me, an essential dimension of personal transformation. I will share various snippets from what he wrote.

To his father, he wrote, "Mother's death opened up for you a dimension of life in which the key word is not autonomy, but surrender. In a very deep and existential way, her death was a frontal attack on your feeling of autonomy and independence, and in this sense, a challenge to conversion, to the profound turning around of your priorities. I am not saying that mother's death made your autonomy and independence less valuable, but only that it put them into a new framework, the framework of life as a process of detachment. ... I believe that a healthy autonomy can give you the real strength to detach yourself when it is necessary to do so. ... We have the option to re-evaluate the past as a continuing challenge to surrender ourselves to an unknown future. It is the option to understand our experience of powerlessness as an experience of being guided, even when we do not know exactly where.

"We can see that a growing surrender to the unknown is a sign of spiritual maturity and does not take away autonomy. Mother's death is indeed an invitation to surrender ourselves more freely to the future, in the conviction that one of the most important parts of our lives may still be ahead of us. ... It is a spiritual process by which we can live our lives more freely than before, more open to God's guidance and more willing to respond when God speaks to our innermost selves."

This kind of spiritual transformation isn't just the result of a death of a loved one. It can come when we let old ideas die, when we face something scary or uncomfortable, but trust the process anyway. I think we heard that in pastor Dan's sermon when he talked about the experiences of the youth and adults at Sierra Service Project in Los Angeles.

When we can detach ourselves from long-held ideas or beliefs, when we let go of that which limits our views and understanding, then a renewal of the mind is possible.

Now to expand that to a more global understanding, let's take a look at the Exodus passage.

The immigrant population was growing in the land of Egypt. The Egyptians were feeling threatened by all these Israelites. So they stepped up the systems of oppression and slave labor and put the heat on the Israelites. But it turned out to not to be a very effective means of birth control.

So the king went to two Hebrew mid-wives, Shiphrah and Puah. He ordered them to kill the baby boys they delivered, but to let the girls live. They were being conscripted into a system of genocide and slavery. They decided to disobey the king and delivered the boys anyway.

They had a choice to make, to conform to the ways of the world – which meant violence and death and obedience to a corrupt system of governance. OR they could detach themselves from their jobs, and perhaps even their lives, since they could be killed for disobeying the king. They allowed themselves to be transformed and by so doing participated in God’s transforming work in the world, work which brings life.

Shiphrah and Puah refused to support a system of oppression. They surrendered themselves to the possibility of their own death in order to transcend a terrible situation. When they were called to account, they came up with a great story about the strong Hebrew women and they survived their disobedience.

You and I face similar choices today (although not so dramatic). Will we participate in a system of oppression, or will we find ways to undermine it?

United Methodists and many others have a ministry in Arizona where they created and maintain water stations in the dangerous hot desert. As people from Mexico and other places try to make their way through the arid land, life-giving water is offered to them without recrimination or judging. It’s simply a matter of offering water and trying to prevent death. These persons of faith are detached enough from their own agendas and cares, that they can make a dent in the brutal conditions facing migrating people.

When people work against apartheid, they are seeking transformation of a global kind, and often risking their own lives to do so. Or to work against the sex/slave industry - an industry that values profit over human dignity...at the expense of children. Or the on-going violence around Gaza and the senseless acts of aggression.

When people work to decrease the strain on the eco-system of our planet they are seeking transformation of a global kind. They are willing to detach from an unsustainable life-style and work toward a more just one.

We can’t tackle everything, but we can do some things. We each need to figure out what our own agency is in the midst of pressures to conform to systems in this world that only deaden the heart.

To be transformed by the renewing of our minds is to be open to God’s transforming spirit that seeks health and renewal for all species and times. It is to get with God’s movement and find a way to help it grow and flourish.

God calls for our partnership in renewing. It is an unknown future, but when we open to God it is a future filled with life and hope. We can trust that! We can put our lives on that promise.

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<sup>i</sup> These are developed in the United Methodist Book of Discipline under “Our Theological Task.”

<sup>ii</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *A Letter of Consolation*, HarperSanFrancisco, ©1982, pp. 6-7,48, 51-53

Also consulted: *Romans*, by John B. Cobb, Jr. and David J. Lull, 2005, *Chalice Commentaries for Today*, pp. 157-163. And *ProcessandFaith.com* commentary.