

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS: Transformation in Community

Theme: When we (1) open our hearts in transparent trust to each other (2) around the truth of God's word (3) in a spirit of mutual accountability, we are in the Holy Spirit's hothouse of transformation.

Text: Acts 2:42-47; selected others

Two summers ago, my wife and I had the opportunity to take a two-week vacation through the enchanting state of Alaska. On this trip we kept hearing unbelievable stories about the oversized growth of living things. We were told about and saw pictures of 500 pound pumpkins and zucchini squash the length of baseball bats. We witnessed daffodils the size of dinner plates. Of course the reason for this is that, though the growing season is only from mid-May to mid-August, the sun almost never sets during these months. It creates a "hot-house" effect. In a hot-house the conditions are maximized for accelerated growth.

I have asked myself the question in regard Christian growth or transformation, what are conditions that can lead to accelerated growth?

Last Sunday, as part 2 of a 3 part series on discipleship, we explored transformation or morphing into Christlikeness from the standpoint of the kind of the *commitment* that was necessary to see us move onto maturity or adulthood in Christ. Paul's dominant image of the process of life change is "putting off" the old and putting on the new. Taking off the old and tattered garments and putting on the new way of life in Christ. I asserted that we need to shift from a trying to a training paradigm in regards to discipleship. Just as an athlete trains and subdues his or her body to compete, Paul tells that we too should train in order to get an eternal prize. The reason why training is necessary for life-change is that we are creatures of habit. You can't change habits by trying only, by training.

To train means that we learn to practice the spiritual disciplines. Not that the practice of bible reading, prayer, solitude, service, worship, etc. actually changes us. Only the Holy Spirit can make lasting changes. But this training regimen opens our spirit so that the Lord can address us. I said that we need to view our lives more like a sail boat than a motor boat. As motor boats we run under our own power, we are in control. But if we view ourselves as sail boats we are reliant on the Holy Spirit to fill our sails. The sails we hoist are the spiritual disciplines we practice. To quote John Ortberg, "Spiritual disciplines are to life what practice is to the game."

Where we concluded last week begged a question which many of you anticipated I would address today. What contexts or settings create the conditions for transformation? What are the climatic conditions that create the

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS: Transformation in Community

hot-house effect? I believe accelerated growth in Christ occurs when three conditions converge: **When we (1) open our hearts in transparent trust to each other (2) around the truth of God's word (3) in a spirit of mutual accountability, we are in the Holy Spirit's hothouse of transformation.**

The best biblical snapshot of the practice of these conditions is the wonderful description of the early church recorded in Acts 2. Here we see a community being transformed to reflect a new way of life in Christ that formed the environment for morphing into Christ-likeness. This community came into being as a result of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (a Jewish harvest festival), which gave birth to the church in response to the apostle Peter's bold message about Christ being Lord and God. Let's see what kind of community these 3000 people became.

Read Acts 2:42-47

There have been many studies done on this passage noting the marks of the early church. The British pastor and scholar John Stott enumerates the marks of instruction, fellowship, worship and outreach. Other commentators use slightly different categories to capture the essential elements of Christian community. For our study this morning I want to zero in on just three conditions necessary for transformation in our journey toward Christlikeness. The three conditions are transparent trust or intentional relationships, the truth of God's word, and life-change accountability.

Note that Luke introduces this section with strong phrase, *"They devoted themselves to..."* This is language of training. The word "devoted" means to "they stayed, persisted, or remained with." I think of Eugene Peterson's phrase: "long obedience in the same direction."

Climatic Condition # 1 Transparent Trust

As the title of this message indicates, "It's All About Relationships". I believe the missing ingredient for life change or transformation is our lack of in-depth of relationships in the Christian community. I will dwell on this first mark far more than the other two. Luke says that *"they devoted themselves to...fellowship."* This is not coffee and donuts in a church fellowship hall nor to be equated with a pot-luck supper. This is not chit-chat over how the Bulls are doing nor one's golf handicap.

The word fellowship is *koinonia*, meaning that which is shared in common. A careful study of this word throughout the New Testament would yield three emphases: what we share *in* together--our common union with the triune God;

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS: Transformation in Community

what we share *out* together—a partnership in mission; and what we share together: our possessions and our lives. We see evidence of all three in this passage, but especially what we share together. Koinonia meant sharing their physical possessions with one another. *“All the believers were together and had everything in common (koine). Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need” (Acts 2:44, 45).* Spontaneously those who had, gave to those who had not. Another’s need drew loving and generous response. Koinonia is sharing our lives with one another as if we belonged together in one family. *“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts...” (Acts 2:46b).* They worshipped formally in the temple at the appointed times and they worshipped and shared their lives informally in their homes. There was place for formal liturgy, and also a place for hospitality and the rhythm of life investments relationally. Their community of faith was their point of reference, closer than their biological families. They had thrown their lot in with “one-another” to the point where their lives were intertwined.

The first condition for life-change is an ever-increasing openness and transparency between one another. Why is relational transparency a necessary condition for transformation? ***The extent to which we are willing to reveal to others those areas of our life that need God’s transforming touch is the extent to which we are inviting the Holy Spirit to make us new.*** Our willingness to enter into horizontal or relational intimacy is a statement of our true desire before God of our willingness to invite the Lord to do His makeover in our life.

You could offer a rebuttal to this relational challenge by saying that you already have a transparently honest relationship with God. Your life is an open book to the Lord. Therefore it is nobody else’s business what my struggles are with my dark side along as I am not deceiving God.

Therein lies the problem. Deception. I would counter that human beings have an almost infinite capacity for self-deception and self-justification. The prophet Jeremiah captured the mystery of the human heart, *“The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9).* For example, the IRS received the following note: *“Gentlemen: Enclosed you will find a check for \$150. I cheated on my income tax return last year and have not been able to sleep every since. If I still have trouble sleeping I will send you the rest. Sincerely,”* This man was willing to be honest up to a point... just enough to help him sleep. What we say we can handle between ourselves and God, most often we cannot. As long as the struggles in our Christian growth remain locked inside our spirit only known to God, then patterns or strongholds of besetting sin will defeat us.

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS: Transformation in Community

Though I have already jumped into the deep end of the pool by hinting that mutual confession is the ultimate destination for the kind of intimacy that is necessary for transformation, let me suspend discussion on this aspect of transparency until later. But before we are ready for the deep end of the pool, transparent trust is built by wading slowly into the shallow end to see if the waters are safe.

What are the elements of transparent trust that will allow us to move gradually into the deep waters of transformation?

- Encouraging one another
- Supporting one another in life's difficulties
- Helping one another discern life's directions
- Confessing our sins to one another

Encouraging One Another

The write of Hebrews exhorted believers with these words, *"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another..."* (Heb. 10:24, 25) Literally encourage means to come alongside to help. In essence, the people with whom we share the discipleship journey need to convey the attitude of unqualified desire that we be all that God intended us to be. We need people who believe in us more than we believe in ourselves.

Gordon McDonald in his book *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion* comments on the cleansing and purifying power of rebuke by saying, *"One solid and loving rebuke is worth a hundred affirmations."* I like to say, that is about the right ratio, 100 affirmations for every rebuke. The problem is that most of us are not living with a hundred words of encouragement to every word of correction. Prior to entering the sanctuary for public worship in a previous church, I ducked into the restroom. Standing side by side at the sink was one of the singers who often performed solos as well as participated in worship leadership with our worship band. I took the opportunity to say, *"Chris, I just want to thank you for the way you bless us in worship. When you sing it is obvious that it is to the Lord and your singing takes me to the place of praise where I need to be. The Lord bless you for what you do for us as a worshipping community."* You would have thought that I told him he had won the lottery. With emotion he said, *"Thank you sooooo much. You have just made my day!"*

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS: Transformation in Community

We are starving for honest and meaningful affirmation in a world that knows better how to beat us up, than build us up.

Supporting one another in life's difficulties

Paul states the rhythm of relationships in the body, *"If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together"* (1 Cor. 12:26).

As I look back at my intentional, longer term small group relationships over the last decade and a half, every one of them had some quality of life threatening circumstance touch at least one of the members of the group. (1) There was Ken, who was diagnosed with cancer six weeks into our commitment to a discipleship relationship of three together. Every third week our triad met on the oncology ward in the hospital chapel. (2) Then there was Mike who got caught in the downturn of the commercial real estate market in San Jose. A quarter of a million dollar tax bill came due. What a joy it was to be able to share in his suffering by mobilizing a number of people who could give Mike a bridge loan to get him over his difficulty. (3) Frank went to work clueless, thinking it was like any other day. On arrival he was told to clear out his desk, it would be his last. How does a man in the Silicon Valley survive such a blow? This is a place that equates one's work and self-esteem. We had the chance to catch Frank in his free-fall before he hit bottom and then speak God's love into his life.

Being carried by the faith of others is often the way to learn to trust God. I have often said to people whose life has come crashing down, "Let my faith carry you for a while. Some day you will be in a position to return the favor." When we enter people's life challenges we have waded into deeper waters together.

Helping one another discern life's directions

Paul says, *"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love."* (Romans 12:10) One of the ways this happens is to listen for God's directional voice together.

Scott is a high school art teacher, who loves to coach football. True, this is not your usual combination. When I invited Scott to join a small group, he was still reeling from the sting of having been released as the Frosh-Soph coach of the high school team by an apparently jealous and threatened Athletic Director. As I listened to Scott share his pain about this dismissal, it was obvious that there was a hole in his heart. He was wired to invest in kids as a coach. He had been invited again to take the coaching job from which he had been let go. At the same time Scott had been asked to serve as an elder at the church of which

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS: Transformation in Community

I was the senior pastor. I drooled at the possibility of having him on my team. Time would not permit both, with his wife and three children as his loving priorities. As we listened to Scott, being an "elder" was the "should", being a coach investing his life in kids was God's call. We had the chance to hear a heart, and release him to the place where the Lord obviously intended to use his witness.

There are a myriad of choices in our life that need to be sorted through to hear God's voice. Left to ourselves, God's voice can be drowned out by the din of the world or the confusion that comes from a multitude of choices. How we need places where we can be ourselves, sort out these conundrums with people who will stay with us and care long enough to follow through! We are now up to our armpits as we move into the deeper end of the pool.

Confessing our sins to one another

The deep end of the pool of transparent trust is mutual confession of sin. To get to the deep end we must go through the shallower waters of the encouragement, support through life's difficulties, and prayerful listening and discernment. Only then are we likely to venture in over our heads by confessing our patterns of besetting sin to one another.

My experience tells me that few believers either have the regular habit or the safe context in which we can reveal to another human being what lurks inside the recesses of our hearts. Until we get to point where we can articulate to another those things that have a hold on us, then we will live under the tyranny of our own darkness. James admonished his readers, *"Confess your sins to another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed"* (James 5:16). James makes a direct connection between confession and healing or wholeness. In this context healing appears to be of a physical nature. Yet James believed that the health of one's spirit directly affected the health of one's body. Much bodily illness is rooted in spiritual or emotional sickness. If transformation into Christlikeness is related to being free from the darkness that can drag us down, then confession is a necessary means to free us from the bondage to sin and addiction.

Martin Luther said that confession *"is useful, even necessary, and I would not have it abolished. Indeed, I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ, for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences. For when we have laid bare our consciences to a brother and privately made known to him the evil that lurks within, we receive from our brother's lips the word of comfort spoken by God Himself. And if we accept this in faith, we find peace in the mercy of God speaking to us through our brother."*

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS: Transformation in Community

Mutual confession is a major missing ingredient today in the process of Christlike transformation. Keith Miller has put his finger on why there isn't more community in the church, *"Our churches are filled with people who outwardly look contented and at peace but inwardly are crying out for someone to love them...just as they are—confused, frustrated, often frightened, guilty, and often unable to communicate even with their own families. But the other people in the church look so happy and contented that one seldom has the courage to admit his own deep needs before such a self-sufficient group of people as the average church meeting appears to be."*

To learn to swim in the deep waters of transparent trust is a necessary element for accelerated growth in the Christian life. Learning to swim can be a scary experience, especially when you are in over your head. But once you learn to trust the water to hold you up, you can relax and experience its refreshment. Relational transparency is a necessary condition for transformation.

Let me touch briefly on the other two climatic conditions for transformation.

Climatic Condition # 2 The Truth of God's Word

In the Acts 2 description of the early community, the passage begins, *"And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching..."* A person who is being transformed has veracious commitment to be instructed in the word. The apostle's teaching is equivalent to the New Testament and the standard of truth to which we are to conform our lives.

I started with relationships because I believe that the context in which God's word should be studied is in community. A great failing today is that we have separated the study of God's word from community or transparent relationships. We have been more concerned about getting our doctrine right than our lives right. We have made a huge false assumption that information will lead to transformation. It is not that knowledge is not important, it is. It is not that right doctrine is not important, it is. It is just not enough. Because the goal is to incorporate truth into our being which happens as we process it in community.

One of the benefits of not being in a pastorate, but in an academic institution for the last four and half years, has been the opportunity to reflect, especially on what happens in worship. I came to realize that we have heard many sermons that we have never had the opportunity to dwell on and apply to

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS: Transformation in Community

our lives. We hear a message, but then we don't stay with it. We are dismissed from worship, enter into conversation and by the time we reach the car, we have lost it. I have come to believe that unprocessed hearing of God's word can actually build up a resistance to allowing it to penetrate our lives. We need contexts with other believers where we can hear, process, and apply the word together. Truth in community.

The first climatic condition to maximize growth is relational transparency, the second is truth in community, and the third is life-change accountability.

Climatic Condition # 3 Mutual Accountability

Throughout this message you have heard one repeated phrase in the Scripture I have quoted. It is the phrase "one another". The New Testament views relationships in the body of Christ as one's of mutuality. Koinonia. What we share in common. There is a rhythm of giving and receiving from one another. Though not stated explicitly in the portrait of community in Acts 2, accountability is one of these "one anothers". Paul writing to the church of Colossae, tells them *"to teach and admonish one another" (Col. 3:16)*. We already heard the writer of Hebrews tell believers *"to stir one another up to love and good deeds"*. We need people in our lives who will lovingly hold our feet to the fire for life change.

To be accountable means to willingly submit our lives to other trusted disciples on the journey who will assist us in making the changes that God has identified that we need to make in our lives. This may be the most countercultural aspect of the relationship that I am identifying as a necessary climatic condition. Robert Bellah's study of the uniqueness of Americans in his book *Habits of the Heart* found that what sets us apart is our view of freedom. But it is a skewed view of freedom at that. It is a freedom from obligation. *We want to be able to do what we want when we want and no one better tell me otherwise*. Raised in a spirit of radical independence, mutual submission grates against everything we have had imbedded in our spirit. Yet, if we hunger to be like Christ, we need contexts in which allow others can call us to account to follow through on the character changes we have been called to make is a necessary element for life change.

In conclusion, what setting incorporates relational transparency, truth in community, and mutual accountability? It is the small group. The early church met in homes, which could not hold more than 10 to 12 people. Our vision of discipleship here at CCOB is built around the belief that transformation happens in contexts where apprentices journey together in little platoons. I see small groups of 10 to 12 meeting in homes, perhaps in geographical areas with trained lay leaders or shepherds guiding people into the kind of community just

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS: Transformation in Community

described and pictured in Acts 2. This congregation would practice the rhythm of centralized, formal worship and decentralized, informal relational groups so that we would be a *place where no one stands alone*. Many of you I know are already connected in group life. Over the next few weeks we are going to ask you to tell us about the groups that are already meeting, so that we have a sense of what is already happening along these lines.

As a concluding story, it is fortuitous that the cover story of this week's Newsweek Magazine was ***Bush and God***. Howard Fineman tells the story of how the Lord used the small group to shape the President's faith. Some of you might say that the Lord has got a lot more work to do. It is well known that the turning point of President Bush's life came in a crisis of facing up to his drinking problem. Donald Evans, Secretary of Commerce, invited Bush to a program called, *Community Bible Study*. Fineman describes it as a scriptural boot camp. Fineman writes, *"that it gave him for the first time, an intellectual focus. He was for the first time reading a book line by line with rapt attention. And it was...the Bible. A jogger and marathoner for years, Bush found in Bible study an equivalent mental and spiritual discipline, which he would soon need to steel himself for his main challenge in his life to that point: to quit drinking. Community Bible Study was...part of what has since come to be called the 'small group' movement."* Truth in community. He experienced all the elements we have been talking about this morning, relational transparency, truth in community, and life-change accountability.

We are in the beginning stages of formulating the various kinds of small groups that would move us into the dimensions of discipleship where the one-anothers can be practiced. When this happens it will be said of us, *"And day by day, the Lord was adding to their number those who were being saved."*