

LOVE Transforms: a sermon for Transfiguration Sunday

When I was a kid the scepter of nuclear annihilation hung over the world's psyche. Children were not immune to the images of mushroom clouds rising in the distance, which held the power to destroy entire populations. I can still remember classroom drills in which we were instructed in the fine art of what to do if a nuclear missile was on its way. We practiced hiding under our desks. Our desks were supposed to protect us from a nuclear blast. It sounds funny now. But I remember the day that I put two and two together. We were watching a film of a nuclear test out in the desert of Nevada which showed dummies being blown away by the nuclear blast; dummies that were miles away from ground zero. It was then that I realized that our teachers were lying to us and that if the big one came our way we would all be blown to smithereens; and if we got lucky and ground zero was just far enough away, we would all suffer the effects of radiation sickness. Images of rotting flesh on the bodies of victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki haunted me and my fear spawned cries of outrage which developed into anger; anger that was embodied in my politics.

I was a very angry teenager. At the time, I believed that my anger was the result of the state of the world and I resolved to change the world. Ah the innocence of youth. It has taken decades and a whole lot of therapy for me to understand that my anger came from a deeper and darker place that rivaled the world's warring madness. I was in fact a very lonely teenager. We moved around a lot. Every year of my life there had been a new school to contend with. Friendships were fleeting at best. The pain of moving from place to place left me longing for something I didn't even know how to describe and that pain came out as anger; anger which I directed at every adult who crossed my path; especially if that adult was in a position of authority. It didn't take me very long to learn that anger isn't exactly socially acceptable. So, I tried my best to bottle it all up. Until the day, I discovered what a lot of young people discover and that is the love affair between anger and politics. So, I took up the cause of my day and became an angry protester who actively fought the proliferation of nuclear weapons. I was 13 in 1970 when Greenpeace was founded in Vancouver and I was there in the Pacific Coliseum at their very first fundraiser. My parents knew nothing about it. My friends and I hitchhiked into the big city to join all those who were protesting the nuclear tests that the Americans were carrying out on the Island of Amchitka. Joni Mitchell, James Taylor and Phil Ochs headlined the concert that launched Greenpeace onto the world stage. So, inspired were we that we spent most of the following year organizing a student strike. In 1971 at the tender age of 14, I was on the organizing committee of the very first High School strike in Canadian history. We managed to convince over 9,000 high school kids from all over the Greater Vancouver Area to walk out of their classrooms and march down to the American Consulate and demand that they put an end to the nuclear testing on Amchitka.

Those were the days my friends. We were going to change the world. Stop the bomb and put an end to the war in Vietnam. Feed the hungry, end racism. What do we want? Peace! When do we want it? Now!

Peace now! Was our rallying cry. Looking back, I realize that I wouldn't have recognized peace if it broke out in front of me. There was so little peace in my life at home. As for the life inside of me, well that was so full of turmoil that peace would probably have driven me to madness. The only thing stopping me from going insane was my focused anger at the injustices in the world. As long as I could rage against the world, I didn't have to listen to the demons that were raging inside of me. Then one day, I started hanging out with a gang. I haven't got time to go into the details of my involvement with this gang; suffice it to say, if I knew what this gang was all about I would never have gotten involved with them. The kids in this particular gang all had one thing in common; the Lutheran church. These kids were part of a Lutheran Youth Group. I won't go into the details but I will tell you that this gang managed to convince me to run away with them. They were going on something I've never heard of before; a retreat. A weekend at a place called Camp Luther.

Somehow, I found myself with a gang of young, socially aware, politically astute kids who wanted to change the world.

Secretly, I thought they might be a cult. It was kind of exciting to flirt with a cult. So, there I was at Camp Luther on the shores of Lake Hatsick. Pastor Don Johnson was one of the leaders. Don is the father of our National Bishop Susan Johnson. Susan was there, but she was one of the pretty and popular girls so I stayed away from her. The very first exercise that we were assigned was to team up with someone we didn't know and share our favorite bible passage. I didn't have a favorite bible passage. I hadn't read the bible. I'd only just started going to church. I decided to break the rules of the exercise and teamed up with someone I knew slightly and suggested that she go first. Dana recited her favorite Bible passage from memory. I was astounded; later I would find out that she was a pk that's code for pastor's kid. I can still remember the passion with which Dana described her love for this particular passage. Needless to say, it quickly became my favorite passage as well. I told Dana so, right then and there; conveniently getting myself off the hook of trying to come up with a favorite passage of my own. 1 Corinthians chapter 13.

Dana recited it from a brand-spanking new translation of the Bible; you may remember it was called "Good News for Modern Man". **"I may be able to speak the languages of man and even of angels but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. I may have the gift of inspired preaching, I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains—but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burnt—but if I have no love this does me no good. Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable, love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth.**

Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail. Love is eternal. There are inspired messages, but they are temporary; there are gifts of speaking in strange tongues, but they will cease; there is knowledge, but it will pass. For our gifts of knowledge and of inspired messages are only partial; but when what is perfect comes, then what is partial will disappear.

When I was a child, my speech, feelings, and thinking were all those of a child; now that I have grown up, I have no more use for childish ways. What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face. What I know now is only partial; then it will be complete—as complete as God's knowledge of me. Meanwhile these three remain; faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love." As Dana spoke of her love for this passage, I began to glimpse my deepest longing. With all of who I was at the age of 15, I knew that I wanted to know this kind of love. I wept.

I was overwhelmed. Pastor Don noticed my pain and gently encouraged me to simply weep. No one said a word. But I was keenly aware of their presence. Later that evening, in the glow of the firelight, I mustered up the courage to ask Pastor Don what his favorite passage from scripture was. Pastor Don spoke these words: **"What will separate us from the love of Christ? Trouble? Calamity? Persecution? Hunger? Nakedness? Danger? Violence?**

As scripture says, "For your sake, we're being killed all day long; we we're looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered." Yet in all this we are more than conquerors because of God who has loved us. For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, neither heights nor depth—nor anything else in all creation—will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, Our Saviour."

Again, I wept. The realization that the love that I longed for was already mine and that nothing could separate me from that love, overwhelmed me. Looking back, I can see that two passages from the bible transformed me. The words transformed me not because of the words themselves,

but because of the way those words found life in the people who treasured them. Looking back, I can see that the Word became flesh and lived among us. All those years ago, in a rundown church camp, I encounter the Word made flesh in the guise of two very imperfect people. People who have gone on to struggle to be LOVE in the world. That nothing can separate us from that LOVE is a gift that over the years continues to transform me. There have been times in my life when the knowledge of the love of God which is described in Corinthians 13 coupled with the knowledge that nothing can separate me from that love has transformed me and continues to transform me. These days, as the Word continues to transform me I am beginning to see beyond my own need of LOVE to the reality that the LOVE that is God abides in every aspect of creation. I am also being transformed by the knowledge that the LOVE that is God is also present in everyone including my enemies. The knowledge that there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can separate anyone from the LOVE that is God is transforming me in ways that are both enlightening and frightening. Because when we begin to see that everyone, including our enemies are loved by God, infused with God, it calls forth a response that will not let me hate my enemies, nor will it let me ignore my neighbours. The Word made flesh is compelling me to open myself to the pain of the world in ways that would be overwhelming if it were not for the reality of the LOVE that lives in, with, through, and beyond us.

Transfiguration comes to us from the Latin translation of the Greek word which in English is metamorphosis. Metamorphosis which means transformation. May the power of the LOVE that is God continue to transform us all, so that LOVE can continue to BE in the world. May the power of the Word made flesh, alive and living in, with, through, and beyond us transform the world, so that all may know the LOVE that is God.

“Meanwhile these three remain; faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, neither heights nor depth—nor anything else in all creation—will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ.”

Amen.