

What Transformation Looks Like

The Rev. Glenda
Simpkins Hoffman

Colossians 3:12-17

Sermon Series:
Journey of Transfor-
mation

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I was sad last week when the Olympics ended. I love watching the Olympics, because I am always inspired by these athletes and what they can do. I can't believe skiers like Lindsey Vonn fearlessly race downhill at speeds faster than I drive in a car. I admire Apolo Ohno, not only for his speed and his strength that enable him to skate in that strange sideways position, but also for his perseverance over many years to acquire more medals than any other Winter Olympic athlete. Yu-Na Kim and other figure skaters astound me, because their sport not only requires incredible strength but balance, agility and grace to do on ice what most of us couldn't conceive of doing on dry land. And then there is Shaun White, whose gold medal performance in snowboarding left me speechless, with my jaw literally hanging open. He was unbelievable.

What we don't see in these pictures is the way they arranged their lives to excel in their sport. We don't see their sacrifice of time, energy and even financial resources. We don't see how they practiced again and again and again in order to become athletes who could do what needed to be done in the moment of competition.

These snapshots depict only a moment in the lives of these Olympic athletes. I propose to you that our passage today is a snapshot depicting the life of a disciple and what transformation looks like.

Paul begins this snapshot with a reminder of who we really are in Christ. It's easy to just read the words on the page, but the truest thing about us is that we are "God's chosen ones holy and beloved." Because of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection, we are God's chosen ones. We belong to God—not because of anything we have done but by His grace, and mercy and initiative. We are God's beloved—created by God in love and for love. We have been made holy. We are meant to reflect the very image of God as we live in loving union with Him. If this is true, then our lives are truly immersed in blessing.

This passage is a snapshot of eternal life. This is not a life that lasts forever that we will have when we die and go to heaven. Eternal life is a qualitative kind of life that is meant to be lived right here, right now, and it can only be lived as we radically abandon ourselves to God. And today's passage really shows us what that looks like and how to live into it. Are you listening? Only a person who is convinced his/her life is overflowing with blessing and is living the eternal, abundant life right

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now can clothe him- or herself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Only a person who is radically abandoned to God and has experienced His love can love others unconditionally by “bearing with one another and forgiving one another as Christ has forgiven.”

I wish I had time to unpack each and every word in this text. I wrote that sermon, but it was way longer than 20 minutes. What I want to do is encourage you to read Robert Mulholland’s book *The Deeper Journey*. This book may be the best book I have ever read; it’s certainly the best exposition of this passage and the entire book of Colossians I have ever read, and I highly recommend it.

I want to spend the remainder of our time together considering how we become this kind of person reflected in this passage. Dallas Willard says “Discipleship is learning from Jesus how to live your life as he would live it if he were you.” How do we live into this picture of transformation? How do you live your life as Jesus would live it if he were you?

In his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard shows us how to use a helpful visual called “The Golden Triangle” of Spiritual Growth. In the middle of the triangle is the life God has for us, and we must keep our minds centered on it. We must keep the vision before us if we are ever going to accomplish it.

I was touched by one of the VISA commercials during the

Olympics that showed a child’s drawing of a skier while Morgan Freeman’s voice said, “When she was a little girl, Julia Mancuso drew a poster of herself as a gold medalist to hang in her bedroom. Well, she doesn’t have to draw her own posters any more”

We don’t have to draw our own posters either. We have the poster of what our lives are meant to look like drawn for us in the pages of Scripture. The Holy Spirit has inspired the writing of the Word of God, and this passage, in particular, is a snapshot of what our lives are meant to look like. The problem is, we don’t keep that vision ever before us. I want to invite you to memorize this passage and continue to meditate on it daily. In doing so, you are “letting the word of Christ richly dwell with you.” You’re hanging this poster in your mind and so keeping this vision of who God wants you to be ever before you.

Once we have the vision in view, what we see at the apex of the triangle is the intervention of the Holy Spirit. To live these qualities requires radically abandoning ourselves to God by relying on the grace and power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish for us what we cannot accomplish on our own. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to fill us, empower us and transform us to become the kind of people who reflect these qualities. The Holy Spirit enables me to live my life as Jesus would live it if he were me. Hear me now: we cannot do this in our own human striving. It is only possible as we let go of our own

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agendas, desires and purposes, and radically abandon ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit.

But reliance upon the Spirit alone will not transform our character in its depths. The action of the Spirit must be accompanied by our response. This active participation on our part has two aspects, represented by the bottom angles in the triangle—ordinary events of life and planned disciplines.

First, accept that your life is the place of transformation. The virtues listed in this passage are relational qualities that are meant to be reflected in the variety of relationships in which we find ourselves in the course of the ordinary events of life—in marriages, families, neighborhoods, work, recreation and on and on. If we ignore these events, we cannot do what Jesus would do 24/7: clothing ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience in the midst of our often messy relationships with others. Your life is the place of transformation.

It may already be dawning on you that each day God places before us multiple opportunities to put on the new nature in each relationship of that day. Perhaps at home this week your spouse or your children interfered with your agenda to be on time, or maybe they don't keep things in order as you would like. And just maybe you expressed your displeasure in no uncertain terms. Perhaps at work you are dealing with budget cuts and the expectations to do

more, and you notice and edge in the way you deal with situations and manage people. Perhaps while driving in the car sometime this week, you were cut off in traffic by someone who clearly shouldn't be on the road, and so you strongly communicated your opinion in words or a gesture. Or maybe it was in the line at a store that you noticed your impatience with the sales clerk or another customer, who was simply taking too long and wasting your precious time.

It's easy to justify ourselves by saying, "Yes, but they really shouldn't have said or done that." Or, "If such and such hadn't happened, I wouldn't have behaved like that." This is your life, and what springs up, even under stress, is really you. Your life is the place of transformation and the place of temptations—whether you are single or married, with children or not, a stay-at-home parent or a business person, government worker, teacher or doctor.

Discipleship is learning from Jesus how to live your life as he would live it if he were you. We don't have to live Jesus' life; he already did that. And we certainly aren't called to live someone else's life. We're not even called to live the life we used to have or the one we wish we had. We are called to live our lives right here, right now, as Jesus would live it if he were us.

So what do we do if we find in the course of our everyday, ordinary life and relationships we do not respond or live as Jesus would live? We could throw our hands up and say, "Well, that's just the way I am."

Spiritual disciplines are means of grace in which we put ourselves before God to allow Him to do what only He can do.

But the third angle of the Golden Triangle shows us another way. This is where spiritual disciplines come in. We should not only want to be compassionate, kind, humble, gentle and patient, we are to make plans to become so.

Again in *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes, “The training required to transform our most basic habits of thought, feeling, and action will not be done for us. And yet it is something that we cannot do by ourselves.... The familiar words of Jesus are, ‘Without me you can nothing’ (John 15:5). But these words must be balanced by the insight that, in general, if we do nothing, it will certainly be without him. Another person cannot learn Spanish for me, nor can someone else lift weights to improve my muscles. And our deepest moral character also is not something that can be developed by anything that is done for us or to us.... We must act wisely and consistently over a long period of time.”

Spiritual disciplines are the way we act. They are the way we practice clothing ourselves with the character of Christ so that we will be transformed and become the kind of person who naturally demonstrates the characteristics described here—even in difficult and demanding circumstances and relationship of our lives.

Let’s go back to athletics. I have told you before that I was involved in sports in high school. I am not by nature a gifted athlete. When I first started, all I had was vision and desire and a good

coach—not a lot of natural talent and certainly no skills. When I first started, I was awkward and self-conscious and made a lot of mistakes. But as I spent countless hours conditioning and practicing, I became a person who was able to pass, shoot and dribble without really thinking about it. I became the kind of player who could do what needed to be done to help my team execute plays, score points and win games.

Athletes understand the necessity of training the mind and body to do what needs to be done in the moment. It is true of musicians, dancers, doctors—we could go on and on.

Spiritual disciplines are for disciples. They are the ways we practice, if you will, so that we can become a people who live our lives as Jesus would live them if he were us. But God lovingly invites us to give ourselves to the Holy Spirit, who is the ultimate change agent. The way I do this is through spiritual disciplines. We offer ourselves to God and practice putting on the new nature of Christ as we pray, read, study and meditate on Scripture. We learn to detach from the things of this world by practicing disciplines such as silence, solitude, Sabbath and slowing. Doing these things is not the end goal. Spiritual disciplines are means of grace in which we put ourselves before God to allow Him to do what only He can do.

As we intentionally offer ourselves to God, we begin to experience the reality Paul refers to when he writes “Let the peace of Christ

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- Robert Mulholland, Jr.

rule in our hearts.” As we radically abandon ourselves to God by letting the word of Christ richly dwell within us, we experience joy and gratitude overflowing in our lives, as Paul describes here. As we live in loving community with others, we experience the blessing of teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.

Spiritual disciplines enable us to put on Christ so we are the kind of people who can, as Paul writes, “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Again, Robert Mulholland, Jr. writes in *The Deeper Journey*, “To do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus is to live our life in the world from a deep center of abiding in God. This is a life of radical abandonment to God in love and equally radical availability to God for others so that in all circumstances and relationships our life becomes one in whom God is present for others.”

This qualitative life does not just happen. To become a person who is able to love others as Christ has loved us involves arranging our lives to live into that vision through spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are as fundamental to the spiritual life of a disciple as shooting, dribbling and passing are to basketball. That is why we are setting aside time and bringing in an expert to coach us through the Sacred Rhythms retreat. We are committed, as a

church, to making disciples, and a big part of that is helping all of us learn to practice these disciplines or sacred rhythms as a means of giving ourselves to God for transformation.

I want you to know that God is really working on me. This study of Colossians has really challenged and convicted me. The real life I’m living is bringing to awareness how much I need to change—how much I need to let go of my agenda and trust God’s Spirit to do for me what I can’t do for myself. I’m looking forward to this retreat myself to renew again my need for spiritual discipline.

And I want to invite you to join me, all the other pastors and your staff at this retreat. I know you are busy, I know your life is harried. I know it’s hard to find the time, but I want to invite you with these words of Jesus taken from Matthew 11 in *The Message*:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

I hope you’ll join me in learning the unforced rhythms of grace, learning to live your life as Jesus would live it if he were you, in learning to live freely and lightly.

