

# REINVENTION OR TRANSFORMATION?

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH MAY 21, 2006

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Excerpt from the gospel text for the Sixth Sunday of Easter-tide:

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. .... No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends .... I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything ... And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last ... I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." (John 15:9-17)

**Changes.** In the midst of the passage from the appointed gospel text today from John about the imperative to love as Christ has loved us – and to make such love manifest and enduring by the way in which we love one another – *something changes*. Or rather, *someone* changes. Those who were once the disciples or "servants" of the master are now regarded as "friends," and in so doing, are given equal status with the One who fully knows God, and "abides" in God. Those who follow Jesus as the Christ are now regarded to be in a radically different relationship; to the extent their identity, the very sense of who they are, or have become, is someone else. It not only changes them and makes them someone different from who they were before; in so doing, it makes their joy "complete."

My reflection on this timely text has brought to mind another, even more redemptive passage for me in recent days. It is from Paul's second letter to the early community of believers in Corinth. It is about those who may have once understood themselves to be who-knows-what, but who now regard themselves as being transformed by the grace-filled love of Christ, as friends of Christ:

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:14-21)

With these two texts in mind then, this sermon is for anyone who ever wished they could change their life and become someone else; to change or amend their life in such a way that one day it would seem as though the old life, the former life, was someone else's life, and someone else's identity.

This is for anyone who ever wished they could reinvent themselves; yet, at the same time knew that – though the past was the past – it would always be unmistakably part of your past. Reinvention was something you could try to do; and in which perhaps you might even succeed. But *transformation* was something else. It is something that happens only by the transformative power of a gospel we call Grace.

Now, you may recall last Sunday we read the story from the New Testament book of *Acts*, about Philip and a strange fellow, the Ethiopian eunuch (*Acts* 8:26-40). The latter was a high court official, successful enough to have his own chariot to go off and spend his vacation traveling to Jerusalem and back, to worship an unknown God in a foreign temple. Philip, a recent Christian convert, is sent by the Spirit to encounter this fellow on the so-called "wilderness road," somewhere between the city and Gaza. There he finds him lounging at a rest stop trying to read a passage from the Jewish scriptures (Isaiah's messianic image of the sacrificial lamb of God), but understanding none of it.

Philip interprets the passage for him by proclaiming the good news of God in the risen Christ, the Messiah; and, as a result, this eunuch (i.e., one with no real future of his own) is given a new identity and a new life. He hears the gospel of Christ preached; and in response, asks what could possibly prevent him from being initiated into this new found faith? Suddenly finding water in the wilderness, he's baptized then and there. A changed man, he heads off down a road that once was only wilderness, never to be heard from again; but this time, Luke tells us, he "goes on his way rejoicing."

For all his curiosity and inquiry, did this stranger discover for himself a way to become something he was not before? Did he re-invent himself, becoming someone else? Or instead, was it only in an *encounter with that which he sought* – enabled by one who had good news to tell, and who himself had been empowered by something (namely, Spirit) beyond himself – that led the one who was only a wandering stranger with no future of his own to become something else, someone other, someone more than he could have ever asked for, inquired of, or imagined himself to be?

Was it reinvention or transformation? Was it someone making a life for themselves, where there wasn't much of a life before? Or, was there something more to it? Was it the transformative power of the gospel of unconditional, unmerited, amazing grace?

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In a shopping center in South Minneapolis some people travel there for bargain prices. But others, who are illegal aliens, come to the parking lot to buy false green cards, passports and Social Security numbers from various dealers who stash them in the trunks of their cars.

Six years ago, a woman named Erika had herself once been hidden in a car trunk when she was five months pregnant, and on the last leg of a long journey. Erika is now a single mother from Mexico. As she put it in a story recorded for NPR's *Marketplace* recently, "I didn't see a future in Mexico because in my culture, single moms are looked down upon. I wouldn't have been able to support my son financially either." As the storyteller puts it,

The first two times she tried to cross into the U.S. she went by foot. She was led by hired guides known as "coyotes". Both times she was caught and sent back to Mexico. Then she found the professional smugglers and their sophisticated operation. When she entered the ID factory she was just another poor, small-town girl looking to get out. But when she emerged, she appeared to be a wealthy Mexican government official. She had the look, the clothes, even the legal documents to prove it. Instead of the usual coyote leading her through the desert, this one was dressed as a cab driver. He was supposedly driving Erika around on a shopping trip in the US.

But, people like Erika can't fully escape these networks, even here in Minnesota. Soon Erika's fake green card will "expire". She'll have to come to a spot like this parking lot to buy a new one. She leads a normal life here in the US. She has a job, pays taxes and her son is in school. She hates dealing with the ID merchants. She says it makes her feel like a criminal. But to keep the life she's built for her son and herself, she says she has no other choice.

"When time goes by, you realize that an illegal document is just that," she says, "and what matters is what you make of your life because there's a lot of illegal people and the illegal person who does real crime pays for it. But if you're good, then life should be good, no matter where you are."

Erika's story is not an uncommon American story. In many ways, it is another example of American re-invention, not unlike those enumerated recently on a radio broadcast of *Talk of the Nation*.

A British earl, Christopher Buckingham, it turns out, is really a Florida man named Charlie Stopford. For twenty years he took on Lord Buckingham's identity until he was caught last year in Alabama.

Frank Abagnale, the con artist who once masqueraded as a Pan Am pilot and wrote *Catch Me If You Can*, has said becoming somebody else isn't all that hard.

Dr. Robert Madrid offered himself as an expert court witness after he moved to Anniston, Alabama, in 2002. His credentials included degrees from Harvard Medical School and MIT, membership in Mensa. It turns out he was also a complete fraud. An investigation earlier this year revealed that almost nothing on Madrid's resume was true, not the degrees, not the history, not even his birthday. Even his name can't be confirmed. Madrid invented it all to shed his past and become somebody else.

Stories like that always sound surprising, but they're also an essential part of the American story. Take John Paul, a hotheaded Scots ship captain who changed his name, fled to America, and as John Paul Jones became a Revolutionary War hero, revered as the founder of the United States Navy. Benjamin Franklin was apprentice to his brother when he was fifteen, but broke the law and ran from Boston to Philadelphia and a new life. The apparently limitless frontier offered the temptation of individual reinvention: second, third or fourth chances to pick up, move, and start fresh. Immigrants could forget or change their ethnic or religious backgrounds, businessmen get out from under bankruptcy, and criminals flee their records.

A History professor, Steven Bullock observes, "I think it's particularly American because it's built into so much of our American culture. ... Tom Paine, the great revolutionary pamphleteer talked about the ability to start the world again. To just begin, start right from the beginning. A religious tradition, in early America was based around a Protestant view of a new birth, where you would literally become someone different. Our economic culture of the free market, is that nothing is to remain the same ... Our ideal of ... the self-made man, Benjamin Franklin, who starts off in poverty and obscurity and ends up becoming this world famous figure. It's, you know, it's something which is just about any where you look in American culture, there's this idea of being able to become something new. So the breadth of the nation allows people to become different."

Then there's this fascinating story a caller tells of himself when he phones into the talk show:

In '75, when I was fifteen, I came across a birth certificate of a cousin that was born a year before I was, and who had died when he was about six months old. And I was in the process of getting my own driver's license and birth certificate and kind of as a lark I got one under that name as well, Social Security card and a driver's license. And I had used it a little bit when I was younger. When I was a teenager I worked part time jobs under that name. I'd pull that driver's license out. I've never actually lived under it, but I've kept it active all those years. ... I have to renew the driver's license every few years. And I've worked a part-time job anywhere from two weeks to one time nearly a year under that name and paid taxes and everything. ... Now it feels like a security blanket. I'm in my forties. I guess later on, I had this feeling if something went wrong with my life, I could always drop it and go to this one.

Amazing.

So, let's see: There's fake identification. There's reinvention. There's even *dual* citizenship. Literally! Now, instead of all this re-invention of one sort or another, how about *transformation*? For, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Here's what occurs to me:

Everyone lives a life and -- in so doing -- knowingly or unknowingly shapes a life for themselves. They become who they are, sometimes by choice, or other times by certain circumstances beyond their choosing. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes a bad choice, or unwelcome circumstance leads one to conclude, "I want to be someone else. I want to reinvent myself, my life, change my circumstances, start over, make a fresh start." So one sneaks across a border, or assumes another identity, or tries living in someone else's skin for a while. In some ways, one might say it's all *very American*. It's also *very human*.

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But long before we individually forged these brave new worlds for ourselves, before all this reinvention, there was, of course, *in-vention*; when we were created to be who we were created to be. And, as a result of that, there is this longing -- sometimes just a hidden, secret whisper of a longing -- to be, or become, something or someone we know deep down to be who we already are as a child of God and God's greatest delight and deepest love.

And then, in all our seeking and longing for a second chance, we are met along a road that once was only wilderness. Far beyond our longing for the chance to make a fresh start -- beyond our desiring, and certainly our deserving -- there is the encounter and the gift of something as elusive as it is convicting, that we simply call Spirit, which tells us the best of *good news*:

*We are the stuff of divine invention. We are made up of the stuff of a kind of love by which "he has loved us." Not only that, we are a part of a divine intention, by which the deadness of the past is left to the past; so that -- by the transformative power of God's grace -- we might ourselves become the imperative to love, "as Christ has loved us." That we might "abide" in such love." And our "joy may be complete."*

Amen.

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