

06 July 2014
Romans 7:15-25a

“Burdens Released”

This sermon is about being transformed. We pretty much all wish the world were a better place, don't we? It doesn't take a genius to figure out that this world could be a far safer, fairer, more just, and a more loving place than it is. I certainly long for a world where peace and civility reign, a world without war and poverty, and hunger. Now, to get that kind of world we would have to change a lot of things: political systems, economic systems, but most importantly, the hearts of many people. I don't have the power to do that. And anyway, if I am honest with myself I know that before I can change the world I have to change myself. We know that the place to start changing the world is right here.

Most of us hope that in the future we will be better people than we are now. One of the advantages of aging is that one becomes more at peace with oneself. But still, I'm not done. I still have stuff to work on. I still carry a few hurts. And I find that the sort of hurt that wounds most deeply is the hurt that comes from the times I disappointed myself, the times I failed, the times I hurt others. We have a hope and longing about ourselves that we might be the kind of people we truly want to be. But we can find ourselves strangely unable to do what we really want to do, unable to make ourselves into the people whom we long to be. Instead, we find ourselves doing exactly what we don't want to do, hurting the people who are closest to us. Those times are etched into our memories, and they are a heavy burden to carry. We carry both hurt and hope.

This hurt and hope we have is a longing to be transformed into new people. We are not alone in this hurt and hope. To paraphrase slightly what Paul writes in Romans, “I just don't understand my own actions. I don't do what I want; I do the very thing I hate. I know what it is right. I will what is right. So why can't I *do* what is right? I don't get it. It's like there's a war going on inside me. Who will rescue me from this mess?”

I think transformation is possible. Maybe I should say that a little differently. I believe that the *process* of transformation is possible, even if in this life our transformation is never complete but always in process; it will not be completed until that last day when God raises us from the dead. Until then God isn't done with us, not by a long shot.

The process of being transformed begins with a gift. We long for newness of life, and that is what God gives us through the waters of baptism, through God's life-giving Word, and through that Word made visible and tasteable and digestible in the form of bread and wine. I cannot stress enough how important it is for us to recognize that what we long for comes from God's gifts.

It would be easy to look at our failures and tell ourselves that we simply must try to do better. Like that solves everything. Now, we can learn from our mistakes; we can even learn from our sins. It would be really good to do so. But real change, real transformation cannot come from us; it must come from our Creator. That is why it is so important to begin not with ourselves but with God's gifts of forgiveness, new life, and re-creation. Through the total and complete

forgiveness of sins through the cross of Jesus and through baptism into his name, God brings us from death to life.

Forgiveness redeems our time and opens the future to us. forgiveness allows us to let go of the past, to lay its burden down so that we might live in the only moment we've got: the present. Forgiveness transforms us. In God's mercy we find our own will being transformed into God's great will. We begin to see ourselves as God sees us. We begins to love ourselves as God loves us. We begin to forgive ourselves as God forgives us. Then the past actually becomes the past, and we are free for a new future.

I am not talking about pretending that something hurtful did not happen. No, the effect of sin is never completely erased. Rather, it is like the nail prints in the hands of the risen Christ. Resurrection did not eliminate all scars of the crucifixion. Even so for us, the future made possible for us through forgiveness is not as if the sin had never happened, but a future marked precisely in and through the scars of our experiences. What might have been is known only to God. What is given to us to know is that our transformation from sin through the power of forgiveness will bring us to newness of life and open the future.

The transformation we seek comes from God's gift of forgiveness. Let us surround ourselves with this gift. Let us give, and let us receive it.

All of us carry hurts within that can burden us and imprison us in the past. God's word to us from Zechariah is, "I will set your prisoners free." God's word to us in the Psalm is, "The LORD lifts those who are bowed down." Jesus' word to us is, "Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." And God's word to us through Paul is, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord!"