

Let's cut right to the chase. If we thought that the Transfiguration—the story about Jesus' face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming white as the light when he goes up on a mountain—is only about Jesus, we should think again. If we take Matthew 5 seriously, if we take the mandate Jesus is giving all his disciples seriously, and seriously engage in trying to live these words, *we* are going to be transfigured. *We* are going to be *transformed*. This should not be a surprising thought. It is, after all, the whole point of our baptism.

In baptism, we die to a temporal, physical, world-defined existence and are born into something life-transforming. So, if anyone sitting here today has not yet been baptized, you may want to listen carefully and think about it long and hard before you do anything so rash. We die to our own agendas, however well-intentioned and carefully planned. And we are born to witness to something so far outside anything that looks or sounds “reasonable” and “sensible” that we often appear slightly strange, if not downright insane, to other people. We die to self-indulgent practices and actions, and we are born anew to love not just our neighbors but our enemies.

There is no way to make this teaching of Jesus look easy or to fit it into the comfortable status quo, and any preacher who tries to do that is going to fail miserably. So the best any of us can do is to admit that these words are every bit as daunting and frightening to pastors, professors and theologians as they are to all Christian believers. Ordination may confer some authority on ministers, elders and deacons, but it does not confer immunity.

If Jesus had to live in the broken world as it exists, so do all the rest of us. If he hit the brick wall of the old ways, so will we. The good news is that when he refused to collude with the powers-that-be to justify the wealthy few being eternally subsidized by the flesh and blood and suffering of the poor people of his day, he proved for all time that we also have the inner strength to refuse collusion and to choose overflowing grace and mercy and justice, and love: to choose the Kingdom of God over the political and economic systems of the nations of this world.

Can we faithfully walk that path without doing anything more than tweaking one or two line items in our personal or family or church budget? No.

Can we do it without feeling unsettled about our choices, off-balance in our finances, and challenged by Jesus? Not likely.

Can we do it without making some profound, life-changing choices? Not a chance.

Can we do it without a day-by-day practice of managing anger, releasing entitlement, changing habits of self-indulgence, and resisting subliminal messages about the false gods of the world? No. No, it doesn't work that way. Never has, never will.

Transformation involves surrender. It involves opening our hands and hearts and releasing our attempt to control everything. Our human inclination is to make our personal lives safe and predictable. But the one thing God isn't is predictable. Living in God's image, or living as God's temple per Paul's instruction from Corinthians, requires some unpredictable and substantial shifts in our inner landscape.

Jesus teaches, *“Do not resist an evil person.”* This raises a lot of questions for me, and I suspect for many of you. Don’t resist one who attacks you? Who steals from you? Who demands involuntary service? He calls for passive resistance. It reminds me of Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. Not to resist means not to hate, not to fight back, but take whatever is given with enduring patience. It is using moral persuasion, and in the cases of Gandhi and King, it seemed to work! Is there a theological basis for passive resistance? Perhaps the key to the passage is the nature of God. God does not resist evil, even to the point of the cross. Isn’t that the way it happened? Humanity is to follow his example. Followers of Christ are to *follow Christ*.

Verse 44 has to contain the most disturbing of Jesus’ statements. We are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Is Christ asking too much of us? How can we love those who hate us and hurt us? Love for enemies is not an emotional love. It is *agape* love, a love for the undeserving and the unlovely. Love is seeing that all people receive justice. It is helping those in need. Why do this? Again, we do it because of the very nature of God that was revealed in Jesus the Son. He loves his enemies; he allows the sun to shine on both the good and the bad and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. As *“children of our Father in heaven”* we treat our opponents as graciously and as generously as we treat our faithful friends. If we love our enemies, we will do as God does—he shares his love and blessings upon all, whether friend or enemy.

But this isn’t the last outrageous sounding thing that Jesus says. Read on. In verse 48 he says, *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* Seriously? Who can be perfect? The word does not mean moral perfection. Since Jesus was the only one who could say, *“Which of you convinces me of sin?”* (John 8:46). There is no way to reach that goal in this life. “Perfect” means wholeness, maturity, holiness, and fulfillment. In the biblical sense, a perfect person is one who has completed or fulfilled his life’s purpose. We are to be perfect because God is perfect. We are to do as God does.

This transformation that Jesus invites us to experience by his personal authority is not a passive waiting game. It is not a software program running in the background of our psyche that will suddenly confer a halo some day in the future, allowing us in the meantime to continue with our current worship of idols in the form of money or power, health or vanity, or any matter we obsess over. Transformation involves choice. The path of Jesus is not taken by merely “not doing” bad things. It is a path about actively choosing compassionate living. Being a disciple is not merely “resisting” evil by avoiding certain things. Discipleship chooses to move actively, intentionally, energetically toward *“whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable,”* as Paul describes it in Philippians 4:8.

Jesus is inviting us to make a major shift of priorities. He asks us to be intentional about where our energy is expended. He asks us to stop behaving as victims, willing to be manipulated by unjust people or systems. He asks us to be as strong and hopeful and powerful and creative as our Creating and Redeeming God is. Jesus invites us to be defined, shaped, and empowered by God’s unwavering hope. He reminds us that we are a new creation, collectively called by God to join in his mission of creating a universe in which all creatures are loved, respected, and treated with goodness, mercy, and compassion. Jesus says, you decide.

We have been liberated so that we can decide for ourselves. Don't blame God. Or the world. Or the president. Or the political party or the economic down-turn. It is your choice to live in fear or to live in love. Jesus says even if you are forced (by Roman soldiers) to serve as their personal baggage handlers for one mile, go with them two miles. What would the world be like if you voluntarily went a second mile, if this should happen to you? I think it's highly unlikely that anyone at Pittsburgh International Airport is going to force you to carry their baggage next time you are there. Unless you're traveling with a family member that tires out before boarding the plane with their carry-on. However, every one of us will at some time be faced with Jesus' next example. "*Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*" What would the world be like if we gave to anyone who asks or wants to borrow something from us?

Living as a follower of Jesus this week, let's remember the story of Jesus' transfiguration that led to his death on the cross. Before the season of Lent begins, Jesus points us to our own personal transformation. We are persuaded to trade the eyes that can see only the limits of the world for eyes that see God's unmeasured abundance. We are urged to turn the unwounded cheek toward those who are violent, so that they can see wholeness and beauty. We are offered the chance to give not only the minimum required, but enough to make clear we are sharing generously. We are invited to walk one more mile; to listen one more time; to smile one more moment; to speak one more gentle word of peace; to hold out a helping hand one more time; to choose to forgive one more situation. We are invited to be the new creation God intended us to be.

Friends: The basis of all Christian ethics is God. "Be holy...be merciful...be perfect" as your heavenly Father is. Our behavior reflects the kind of God in whom we put our trust. To believe in and to surrender to God as God is to be like him by obeying his commandments and imitating him in word and deed. God will never ask us to be or do more than he is and does. So...

Do as God does.

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