

Becoming Aware and Giving Our Consent

2 Corinthians 3:18

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (NRSV)

I

On a cold Sunday morning in February 1971, I was baptized at a small mission church. Since our church was so tiny, I was the only one baptized that day. When the time came, I knelt at the front of the sanctuary; the pastor poured water on my head; pronounced the words of baptism; then took me by the right hand, pulled me to my feet, and welcomed me into newness of life.

That day, I thought that in the twinkling of an eye I was going to be transformed into a perfect follower of Jesus. That's why I asked for baptism. The theological rhetoric of leaders in that particular congregation was that when you were baptized, the Holy Spirit would instantly transform you into the kind of person God wanted you to be. At least that's the theological rhetoric that my twelve-year-old self remembers. This promise of moral transformation attracted me. That day of baptism was my first and foundational yes to God.

However, after that baptism no instantaneous change happened that I could see. I was the same shabby sinner with the same unsavory tendencies as before. For days afterward I was the same old same old. The days stretched to weeks, the weeks to months, and the months to years.

I was profoundly disappointed. I was told that change would happen immediately, but as far as I could see, it had not.

In the forty-eight years since then, I've been on a quest for transformation in the world, in the church, and pre-eminently in myself. This quest propelled me into voluntary service with Mennonite Central Committee, into teaching conflict resolution skills and mediating conflicts, into the pastorate, into spiritual direction and the study of Christian

spirituality, and into teaching. The desire for transformation has motivated virtually everything I've done since my baptism. Questions about transformation have held my attention more than any other set of questions. What does authentic Christian transformation look like? How can we identify it? And more importantly, how does it happen? In the delicate, ongoing dance between God and us, what is God's role in transformation, and what is our role?

II

Today is Mennonite World Fellowship Sunday. On this day, or a Sunday close to it, churches that belong to Mennonite World Conference celebrate our Anabaptist heritage. Today is an excellent chance for us to focus on transformation, because transformation was a theme dear to the hearts of the first Anabaptists. In a context where virtually everyone was automatically baptized as an infant, those Anabaptists rejected infant baptism and embraced adult baptism. They agreed that only adults could make an informed choice about whether or not to follow Christ. For them, baptism was the key turning point for Christians. In baptism, the Holy Spirit changed them inwardly and empowered them to live the way of Christ. They were converted, regenerated, transformed.

However, those early Anabaptists did not always agree about how fast and how extensive that transformation would happen. One of the realities of our denominational heritage is that we do not have a single influential leader. The Lutherans have Martin Luther, who decisively shaped all Lutheran churches; the Reformed have John Calvin, who deeply influenced Reformed churches that came after him; and the Methodists have John Wesley. Not so we in the Anabaptist tradition. Depending on who you want to count as a leader, there were perhaps dozens of Anabaptist leaders, and they didn't always agree with each other. Transformation is an example of this. The Swiss Anabaptists like Michael Sattler and others tended to think that baptism leads to a quick and extensive transformation. However, over in south Germany, Pilgram Marpeck disagreed, arguing

that transformation happens much more slowly, over a lifetime, and that sin is a continuing reality that we in the church have to deal with.

After working as a pastor for 28 years and a spiritual director for 22 years, it's obvious to me that Pilgram Marpeck was right. I've never seen an instantaneous, thoroughgoing transformation happen in anyone. I think the power of the Holy Spirit could make that kind of transformation happen, but I haven't seen it yet. Instead, what I've seen is slow transformation that happens over a lifetime, in fits and starts, with plenty of road bumps and detours. If you are baptized, and if you look honestly at your own life, you probably know exactly what I'm talking about.

III

The question before us, then, is this: How can we cooperate with the transformation that God wants to accomplish in us?

We always want to remember that transformation is mainly God's work. God is the one who is always taking the initiative with us. God takes the initiative to create us, to save us, to empower us, and to transform us. God is always up to something in our lives, even if we don't always know exactly what it is that God is up to. This is one of the most important overarching themes in the Bible: God takes the initiative with us.

Since God takes the initiative, that means our role is to respond cooperatively. Sometimes it might feel to us like we're taking the initiative with God, but that's not really the case. Everything we do in our life of faith is a response to what God has already done and is right now doing to us. We are always in a response mode to God, looking for ways to cooperate with what God is trying to do. So again, the question before us is: How can we cooperate with the transformation that God wants to accomplish in us?

Basically, we cooperate with God by using a two-step process. The first step in this process is to become aware of God. God is present and available to us all the time, everywhere. True, sometimes it might feel to us like God is very far away. That feeling of distance from God can sometimes last for many long years. Yet in fact God is always near to us, even if we don't sense it.

What helps us to become aware of God? Becoming aware of God is mostly about noticing. In this moment, what am I noticing about God? You can ask yourself this during a worship service, a Christian education class, or a fellowship or mission event. You can sometimes ask yourself this at work, depending on the kind of job you have. You can ask it at home, out in creation, or while waiting in line at the store. Right now, wherever I am, what am I noticing about God?

You can also ask a closely related question. Right now, what am I noticing about myself or others in relation to God? Maybe I notice that I'm sad or anxious, tired or distracted, grateful or peaceful. Maybe I notice that others are thoughtful or joyful, tearful or angry. Whatever. By asking these two questions over and over, we build our capacity to become more aware of God's presence in our lives. What do I notice about God? And what do I notice about myself or others in relation to God?

A moment ago I suggested that we cooperate with God using a two-step process. The second step in this process is to give God our consent. Basically, this means to keep opening ourselves up to God and saying yes to God's invitations. We give our consent at our baptism, of course, but true transformation happens when we keep giving God our consent again and again—a thousand, even ten thousand times in our lives. Saying yes can happen in all sorts of ways. Maybe you sense God inviting you to pray for your curmudgeonly neighbor. Maybe it feels like God is inviting you to pause in the morning with your cup of coffee and do nothing except sip and become aware of God's presence in the room. Maybe it seems as though God is nudging you to slow down a bit from your hectic life and simply enjoy the laughter of children, the delicate beauty of a flower, or the haunting harmonies of a song. There are oodles of ways to give our consent.

Becoming aware and giving our consent is deeply rooted in scripture. Moses became aware of a burning bush, then gave his consent to the assignment God asked him to do (Exodus 3). Isaiah became aware of the glory of God, then gave his consent to speak for God (Isaiah 6). Mary became aware of an angel in her room, then gave her consent to bear the Messiah (Luke 1). One of the threads in Jesus' ministry was simply helping people to notice what the kingdom of God was all about. His parables, like his healings and

teachings, were crafted to help us perceive God's new reality that lies just beyond the ordinary reality that we see with our physical eyes. "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed," he says, and then invites us to participate in that kingdom which is so radically different than any of the kingdoms of this world (Matthew 13). The man called Saul, while traveling on the road to Damascus, became aware of a light from heaven flashing around him, and of a voice confronting him with the question, Why are you persecuting me? (Acts 9). That same man, later called Paul, wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that when we are in Christ, the veil is removed from in front of our faces, and we can now become aware of the glory of God, and that our consent to Christ transforms us by degrees into that same glory.

IV

I began today by pointing out how our transformation in Christ usually takes a slow, fitful course. Yet here's the thing: transformation actually can happen. I have watched slow but powerful transformations occur in other people that would make your eyes widen in wonder. In every case that I can think of, these transformations happened because the person became more aware of God and then gave their consent to God.

On our church's website you will find a new page called "Spiritual Formation." From the home page, navigate to the Resources tab, then drop down to the "Spiritual Formation" section. There you will find a selection of 22 resources that may help your ability to become more aware of God, and consent to God. The first 5 resources listed there are free apps for your smartphone or other device, available through Apple Apps or Google Play. I have used all of these myself and commend them to you as excellent aids in transformation.

On this World Fellowship Sunday, let us, along with other Christians around the world, notice God's initiatives among us, giving God our consent.