



Sermon for the Second Sunday of Lent
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A Protestant moved into a neighborhood that was predominantly Catholic. Everything was fine for a few months, but when Lent rolled around the Catholic folks were told by their priest that they had to eat only fish on Fridays for Lent while the Protestant's priest told his congregation that they could choose what they wanted to do for Lent.

The Protestant chose to give up chocolate and every Friday evening he would go out in his backyard and grill a whole bunch of ribeye steaks for his family dinner. The smell of the roasting meat was driving his Catholic neighbors crazy, so they all got together and came to see him. "We can't stand it," they said, "you've got to switch to Catholicism so we're all on the same page here in this neighborhood." The Protestant decided that Christian is Christian so he went to the Catholic church that Sunday and switched over – the priest sprinkled him with holy water and said "you were born a Protestant, you were raised a Protestant, and now you're a Catholic."

But low and behold, that very Friday the neighbors smelled him firing up the grill again – and there he was with a big ribeye steak on the grill and he sprinkled it with water and said "you were born a cow, you were raised a cow, but now you're a fish!"

Transformation is not easy. For us to be transformed into the image of Christ is not as simple as just having holy water sprinkled on us, or just giving something up for the 40 days of Lent, or just trying to think differently. If we really want something to change in our lives it takes time, it takes daily effort, and it takes the determination to keep trying and not give up even when we have a bad day. If you've ever tried to stop smoking, lose weight, or learn a new language, then you know exactly what I'm talking about. Transformation is not easy.

Lent is all about transformation and Jesus talks about it in today's Gospel text: he tells us we must be "born from above" if we are to see the Kingdom of God. In other words, we must be radically transformed, we must experience a change of perspective and behavior that is roughly equivalent to being reborn as a new person. That's a lot of transformation.

Let's take a moment to be sure we know what Jesus is saying. First of all, he uses this phrase the "Kingdom of God" and he assumes that it is something we want to see – but is it? First tell me what it is and then I can decide if I'm so excited to see it that I'll undergo radical transformation. The Kingdom of God is the Bible's phrase for God's dream of what human relationships should be – our relationships with each other and with God. The dream of God is that we would live in relationship with each other, and with God, in a way that reflects the love, care, and respect of God's own life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God's dream is for human relationships to look like the loving relationship of God's own Triune life.

I think I can honestly say that I would like to see that. I mean, it has to be better than the agony of brokenness, hatred, and violence that characterizes so many human relationships as they are now. What Jesus is telling us that if we are going to see and participate in God's dream for humanity then we are all going to have to be transformed. We have each, in different ways, played our part in the brokenness of relationships as they are now and therefore we must each, in different ways, play our part in being transformed and being a part of bringing God's dream to fulfillment.

When we see how difficult transformation is, and how far we have to go to live into God's dream for us, then we might become discouraged. But Jesus encourages us to have hope, because we are not in this alone. First of all, notice that he says that he has not come to condemn us but to save us. Yes, we will fail; yes, we will fall short; yes, transformation is difficult, but in Christ we stand before God as forgiven and beloved children. In all things, and in all moments of life, God is working to help us and not to condemn us.

Notice, secondly, the imagery that Jesus uses when he says "the wind blows where it chooses." Wind is not something we can control and neither is God. Like the wind, Jesus tells us, God will act and work without consulting us first. God may not transform us when we want, the way we want, but he will transform us. We cannot control the wind but we can respond to it. We can set up windmills to convert wind power to energy, we can set the sails of our boat so that the wind propels us through the water, and we can sit on the porch at the end of a hot day and enjoy the coolness of the breeze. Our job is not to try to control God, our job is to be

alert to when the Spirit of God is moving and then to set our sails so that the rushing power of God propels us forward into God's dream.

Most Sundays I finish the service by offering you a blessing from the altar after the post communion prayer. But during Lent we forego the blessing and instead I offer you a solemn prayer. For each of the Sundays in Lent there is a different solemn prayer, each meant to ask God's help in this challenging work of transformation. In the light of Jesus' words to us today, about the truth that he has not come to condemn us and the reality that transformation is God's work to which we respond, I am especially struck by the words of today's solemn prayer. You will hear these words again at the end of the service, but I invite you to hear them now in the light of the Father who loves us, the Son who does not condemn us, and the Holy Spirit who empowers us to transformation, because these words call us to place all our hope and trust in God's work to bring about God's dream for us:

Keep this your family, Lord, with your never-failing mercy, that relying solely on the help of your heavenly grace they may be upheld by your divine protection; through Christ our Lord. Amen.