

How Do We Translate Our Faith into Action?

Ephesians 2: 1-10

We are coming to the end of our sermon series on Brian McLaren's 10 questions for a new kind of Christianity. And as we look at our last question, How do we translate our faith into action, I have some bad news to share with everyone, that news being...there is no magic formula for us to follow to make this happen. There are no top ten ways which we need to implement to become a better person of faith. There are no three points and poem which can be shared with us on Sunday mornings which will translate our faith into action. Even after 2000 years of church history and church tradition, no one has this faith thing completely figured out and perfected. So if anyone tells us that they have, my advice to all of us is to run as fast as we can in the opposite direction.

Because usually what that person is offering is a shallow form of the Gospel message, one without transformation, one which will allow us to stay in our comfort zones, one which will encourage us to continue "othering" people, separating, dividing everyone into us versus them categories. Usually if a person tells us that they have this faith thing all worked out, what that person is offering in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is cheap grace...which "is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline,

Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the Cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate”

You see, the reason why I say that there is no magic formula to translating our faith into action is because the faith journey is hard. It is filled with ups and downs. It is filled with doubts, worries and fears. One minute we think we have got it all figured out and then something happens, and suddenly we realize we know next to nothing. Growing in faith takes dedication. It takes discipline. It takes reading our Bibles every day, immersing ourselves in the Word of God. It takes meditation and prayer. It takes admitting that we don't always have the right answers or that we even have the answer to some of life's big questions. Growing in faith takes being dialogue with other people of faith, learning from their experiences and realizing that our way is not the only way to fully know God.

Translating our faith into action is a process and there are no easy answers. There are no short cuts, no passing go and collecting \$200. There are no quick and painless ways to becoming the person God created and called us to be.

Even Jesus describes the faith journey, describes the process of translating our faith into action as picking up our crosses and following him. All throughout his ministry, Jesus cautioned his disciples that people would turn against them, that

people would spit on them, persecute them, even kill them all because of Jesus' name.

Jesus knew that by becoming one of his disciples, it would put his followers opposite to the rest of the world. Noticed I didn't say opposed but opposite to the rest of the world meaning that the world will think we, as Jesus' disciples, we are crazy, foolish even to believe that love will overcome the darkness. The world will mock us and call us naïve because we have the audacity to hold onto as our guiding light a vision where one day the lion will lay down with the lamb and a little child will lead them. Jesus knew that by agreeing to be his disciples, it would place us in a different narrative than the rest of the world, a narrative where power and might are not what guides the story but rather grace and mercy do, a narrative where the meek will inherit the earth and mourning is transformed into joy, a narrative where all are embraced and welcomed as Beloved Children of God.

Jesus knew that the faith journey, that translating our faith into action cannot be summed up in simple platitudes and easy catch phrases. Rather, it was and is a process of transformation. It is a dying to our old ways and experiencing the birth pains of new life. Jesus knew that there was a cost to discipleship, a cost to translating our faith into action for his followers. As we begin to reorient our lives away from the ways of the world to the ways of the Kingdom of God, we realize that there is a new way of life, life of joy and peace here and now, if we only have

the courage to take the first steps on the walk, the walk which leads us to the Kingdom of God already in our midst. This is what Jesus preached. This is what Jesus taught his disciples and it is what Paul reiterates in his letter to the Ephesians.

In our text today, in good Pauline fashion, Paul is blunt and to the point as he addresses this community of faith at Ephesus. He simply says to them, “You were dead.” You were dead to sin. You were dead, caught in a stagnant way of life, a life in which darkness ruled, a life where there was no hope. Paul tells this group you were powerless to change all that. No ifs ands or buts...you were dead. There was nothing you could do to save yourselves from this life of death and darkness. You were helpless and hopeless.

I know right... Paul sure has a way of capturing his audience, a way of building up their self confidence. However, let's cut him a little slack because by being so blunt, he is simply reminding them of the past, of their lives before they became disciples of Christ. Before this community of faith became disciples of Christ, their lives were desperate. It did feel like there was no hope. It really did feel like the darkness had overcome the light. Before they knew Christ, they were lost, spinning their wheels with nothing to guide them to new life.

But then Paul changes this hopeless narrative with one simple phrase... “God saved us”. God literally transformed us, bringing us through death and

darkness to the light of new life. Paul tells this community of faith that God saved us and invites us to experience here and now a life beyond our imagination, a life filled with vitality and vibrancy, a life grounded in the promises of the Kingdom of God, a life rooted in the understanding that this world will not have the last word.

They have been given a gift and the best part of all, Paul says is that this gift of new life is freely given to us as Beloved children of God. We did nothing to deserve it. We did nothing to earn it. All the money in the world could not buy this gift. All the rewards and honors would not qualify us for this gift. It was freely given to us because God loves us more than we could ever imagine.

Take a few minutes and let that sink in...I know we say things like this every week but wow, this gift of God's grace is the most humbling and life transforming news we could ever receive. This bit of news changes everything for us as disciples of Christ. And it is this bit of news which helps us begin the process of translating our faith into action because it reminds us over and over again, that God is God and we are not.

Again humbling and life changing all at the same time because what Paul reminds us is that the saving of the world is not up to us. That's God's job, not our job. What is asked of us is a reorienting of our lives towards God's grace and God's mercy, allowing these to be what guides us each and every day, allowing

these values of the Kingdom of God to shape us, to transform us as we continue the process of dying to our old ways and experiencing the gift of new life.

What Paul is telling the community of faith at Ephesus, telling us today is that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God is reimagining the whole human situation. Death and darkness do not have the last word. Brokenness and hurt do not have to be the way we constantly live out our lives. Violence and hate do not have to be what rules our decisions and actions.

God changed all that when God saved us and invited us into a life of vitality and vibrancy more than we could ever imagine. We were lost but now...now we have been found. We have been welcomed and embraced as Beloved children of God. Now we are experiencing the power and glory of the Kingdom of God here and now, in our midst. In small and ordinary ways, each and every day, we are seeing God at work in this world bringing healing and wholeness for all of God's. And we know...we know that this world of hate and hurt, this world of violence and pain, we know that this world where injustice abounds, will not have the last word. We were lost but now...now we have been found.

And we respond to such a gift by not taking any of it for granted. It is a gift freely given. It is a gift freely shared. It is a gift which humbles us and transforms us. It is a gift which inspires us, empowers us to translate our faith into action

because this gift is too precious to hoard and keep to ourselves. We want to share it with everyone we meet. We want to invite them to a life filled with vitality and vibrancy. We want everyone to know that the Kingdom of God is in our midst and one day...one day it will be here on Earth as it is in Heaven.

So we become partners in the building up of God's Kingdom here on Earth. We begin to walk a path which leads us away from the ways of this world, a path which is filled with God's grace, a path which is guided by the lift of God's love. God. Through God's grace, a gift freely given, we were transformed and now begin the process of translating our faith into action.

By knowing that we did nothing to receive God's grace yet, it was freely given to us, this invites us to see our interactions with others differently. Knowing that God is God and we are not inspires us see beyond the quick judgements we often make of other people, to reach beyond the walls we build to divide and separate, to look for the image of God in all that we met each and every day. This is what strengthens us. This is what gives us courage to become the people God created and calls us to be. This is what makes our faith real, makes it tangible. When the gift of God's grace opens our eyes to the Kingdom of God already in our midst, our faith translates into action.

Or let me say it this way...A few weeks ago, when we started out on this journey with these ten questions, I shared that it was my hope that by the time we reached the end of this series, that although we might not have all the answers to these big faith questions, we would gain a better appreciation of the deep and meaningful work we are called to do as disciples of Christ, the active work of being a community of faith in conversation, in dialogue so that the world would know that there is another way to be... a way of grace, a way of love, a way that holds the welcome of God as our center and encourages us reach across labels and divides and to truly become the One Body of Christ here on Earth.

Well, as many of you know, a few weeks ago, Sandy Gruzesky and I were a part of a learning session which taught us deliberative dialogue, a process which invites people from all walks of life to come together and talk, to see issues or problems from varying viewpoints. At one point during our workshop, the clergy were invited to go into a separate room while our lay folks went into another area. And it was amazing to me, and not in a good way, as I listened to my fellow colleagues share stories about how people in their congregations were so quick to judge one another simply because of the labels placed upon them by the outside world. I heard my fellow colleagues share their feelings of hopelessness and how they felt powerless to change the conversations. As I listened to them talk and share stories, all I could think of was again the importance of the active work to

which we are called as disciples of Christ, the important work of changing the narrative through God's grace and love and how truly impossible it feels to do this work in our world today.

I was about at the point of giving up hope on the whole process until one of my colleagues said, "Before we began this process of dialogue, I didn't have a lot of faith in it. I thought it would just be another gimmick or trick to implement in our churches which would offer us no results. But after listening to all of us share, it hit me that if we as the Body of Christ don't have the courage to have these conversations, then who does? I guess it says something for us as disciples of Christ, that we can agree to come to the table and break bread with one another with having to agree on everything. Guess it just goes to show us that God's grace is alive and well in our world. And that it is a gift that we should give thanks for each and every day because it is definitely at work in our world. Amen.