

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 20, 2015
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Mark 9:33-37

REFLECTION

"Republicans are caught between a base that in many ways is resisting what America is becoming on many fronts and a majority that is comfortable with that change."

Ron Brownstein, National Journal
<http://www.scpr.org/programs/take-two/2015/09/16/44486/2016-election-reagan-library-republican-debate-to/>

Transformation vs. Restoration 2015

Peter talks regularly about how his childhood is going away. A favorite restaurant closes, an empty lot is hosting construction, his toddler bed is given away...he grieves the loss of his childhood. It's hard to convince him that he is right smack in the middle of the best childhood ever – and – that change in his life brings him closer to the things he wants most – like the opportunity to play for the Dodgers (something you can't do as a child unless you're in the movies).

Peter's longing for "the good old days" is a response, in part, to a memory that paints the past as more perfect than now. Third grade is hard. Kindergarten was so much easier and the teacher was the best and the kids were nicer and the weather was better. Actually, Kindergarten was a difficult year – the teacher was the best but so were the 1st and 2nd grade teachers – the kids have always been prone to bullying – and the weather has always been what it is. The golden years are not just in the past – but our memories can trick us into thinking so – especially when things are not the way we want them to be.

As much as we try to give Peter agency in his life and decision-making power in our pseudo-democracy of a family – children do NOT have as much power as the adults in any system. More often than not, their lives are shaped and controlled by external forces – something that was as true – maybe more true – in antiquity as it is now.

So for Jesus to hold up the powerlessness of children as the ideal – as a reversal in the power structure of society – was radical – ridiculous – astonishing – paradigm-shifting. But it was a reversal that appealed to those on the bottom of a power-driven

social hierarchy – people oppressed and controlled by the Roman military – people bound by social/religious laws that made daily life more of a struggle – outsiders and outcasts who could see no way out of their suffering.

The Jesus message of social transformation where G-d put the last first and those at the bottom moved to the top – was so empowering it continues to speak to people 2000 years later in most cultures and climates. It is at the core of the Occupy Movement, all Civil Rights movements, the Burning Man experience, the so-called Arab Spring. It is integral to the transformation of the lives of battered women and children, ghettoized and incarcerated people of color, people born into unfamiliar places on the gender identity and sexual orientation spectrum, economically challenged and physically unique human beings.

And it is interesting that people who perceived themselves or their parents as having had it good in the good old days – people who are being pushed in order to make room for other people's equal access and agency – claim the same message for themselves, feel the same sense of persecution, organize themselves to push back and reclaim power they feel they have lost.

This is where we hear the claims of conservative Christians who believe that sensitivity to other religious traditions means that Christmas is under attack and their religious beliefs are being infringed upon. Because Kentucky County Clerk, Kim Davis, holds a religious belief that gay marriage is not blessed by G-d, she is willing to break the law, refuse service to gay couples and go to jail – and would swear that Jesus backs her up. This is where we see wealthy capitalists defending their practice of hoarding massive amounts of money without contributing back to society, refusing to pay taxes, and insisting on buying elections to protect their rights. This is where we see Whites claiming reverse racism and the right to stand their ground in the face of that which we don't understand or don't want.

Powerlessness is being unable to produce an effect, feeling feeble and impotent, lacking strength or resources. When people feel powerless there is either surrender or rebellion, victimhood or volition. And as certain groups of powerful people experience a loss of previous influence, a "Restoration Movement" arises – the desire to reclaim "the golden years" is expressed – and selective memory is engaged to create the vision of a return to what was right and good. There is a sense that an inheritance has been lost – something valuable has been "stolen" and must be reclaimed – which brings with it self-righteousness and an attitude of entitlement.

The United States of America is currently experiencing – going through – creating – involved in – a massive culture shift. We are in the throes of Transformation – metamorphosis – a deep sea change as powerful as El Nino. Marriage Equality is now the law of the land – a miracle in light of the political ideologies embodied in our Supreme Court. The vast majority of Americans now believe LGBTQ folks are born LGBTQ and are entitled to equal rights.

Through immigration and birth, People of Color are quickly becoming majorities in congressional districts around the country – hence the push-back through gerrymandering of districts and the institution of voting rights laws. Black Lives Matter is not just a slogan tossed out by a powerless minority. It is a belief proclaimed by a growing majority of the population – in a society no longer dominated by bigots who are now frustrated by laws that limit their perceived entitlement to more rights than others –including the right to live and breathe and matter.

Women are finally using the suffrage rights gained a hundred years ago – becoming a force to be reckoned with in elections – as both voters and candidates – making it politically uncool – might I say dangerous – to objectify, insult and neglect the needs and rights of our gender.

Ron Brownstein of the National Journal has adeptly framed our current political debate as the clash of two coalitions: Transformation and Restoration. In an interview on public radio he reported that Donald Trump’s popularity comes mainly from working class whites without a college degree. They are culturally conservative, economically squeezed and resonate with his extreme views on immigration. The base of the Republican Party today, the Coalition of Restoration, is hostile to change, uneasy with the demographic shifts in this country – unmatched since the turn of the 20th century – which are most apparent in the public school system where the majority of students are now kids of color. “Culture, not class, drives American politics today.” Values, not class, is the fault-line.

Ron Brownstein, National Journal
<http://www.scpr.org/programs/take-two/2015/09/16/44486/2016-election-reagan-library-republican-debate-to/>

Applying Brownstein’s coalition theory, the extremes of the political right make sense. It is a reaction to feeling powerless in the face of changes beyond our control – migrations of millions of people, values of acceptance that come naturally with familiarity with the “other,” climate change that is forcing social change...

The old hierarchies of race and class are disintegrating. This is the coming of the Realm of G-d – the Beloved Community. This was the message of the Jesus Movement in antiquity. This is the message of Progressive Christianity today.

This is the message of Mt. Hollywood UCC as we operate out of Core Values rather than a mission statement – as we work to influence and reshape society with values-driven social media and hands-on projects that make connections with others in this Coalition of Transformation.

Arguments about who is the greatest don't cut it.

Aligning ourselves with children and other historically marginal populations – building a coalition of people with a consensus around healthy, social change – is the path to a meaningful and transformational life.

The best is ahead of us, not behind us. Let's get moving!

Scripture Reading for Sunday September 20, 2015 – Pentecost 17

Mark 9:33-37

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

&&& Definitions

POWERLESS

unable to produce an effect

1. ineffective. 2. feeble, impotent, prostrate, infirm.

without power or authority

early 15c., "lacking might or fortitude"

1: devoid of strength or resources <powerless victims>

2: lacking the authority or capacity to act

TRANSFORMATION

a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance.

"its landscape has undergone a radical transformation"

change in form, appearance, nature, or character.

synonyms: change, alteration, mutation, conversion, metamorphosis, transfiguration, transmutation, sea change;

More

a metamorphosis during the life cycle of an animal.

PHYSICS

the induced or spontaneous change of one element into another by a nuclear process.

RESTORATION

1.the action of returning something to a former owner, place, or condition.

synonyms: repair, repairing, fixing, mending, refurbishment, reconditioning, rehabilitation, rebuilding, reconstruction, overhaul, redevelopment, renovation; informal rehab

"the restoration of derelict housing"

2.the return of a hereditary monarch to a throne, a head of state to government, or a regime to power.

synonyms: reinstatement, reinstitution, reestablishment, reimposition, return

"the restoration of democracy"

the replacement or giving back of something lost, stolen, etc

1.the act of restoring; renewal, revival, or reestablishment.

2.the state or fact of being restored.

3.a return of something to a former, original, normal, or unimpaired condition.

4.restitution of something taken away or lost.

5.something that is restored, as by renovating.

6.a reconstruction or reproduction of an ancient building, extinct animal, or the like, showing it in its original state.

7.a putting back into a former position, dignity, etc.

: the act of bringing back something that existed before

: the act of returning something that was stolen or taken

&&& Ron Brownstein, National Journal

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NOTES: Blue collar views align with Trump – working class whites

Without college degree

Immigration – extreme views – deport all – no Spanish

Alienated culturally conservative, economically squeezed

Coalition of restoration

Wave of demographic change unmatched turn of 20th century

No longer majority in country

Hostile to change

Majority comfortable with change

Race unease maj pub schools = kids of color

Centrifugal pull Black Lives Matter – challenging not just persuading – impatience re mass incarceration

Push back – if you can't build a broad consensus for change, you are at risk

Culture not class drives American politics today

Dem minority, whites comfortable w change

Rep uneasy with gay marriage and immigration, Gun control, role of women

Values – not class is the fault-line