Transforming our Lives from Worldly Power to Spiritual Power

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February 26, 2023

Texts:  
 Psalm 32  
 Matthew 4:1-11

In the beginning of the Handbook for Churches and Mission groups, Gordon Cosby and Dorothy Devers reveal that

As the family of God, bound to God and to one another through Christ, the Church is fundamentally transformative — transforming the lives of its members, who, in turn, seek to transform the world in which they live. Thus, although the church exists as an end in itself, it also is ready to lose its life for the redemption of the world.” (p.6)

Lent is the time when we can be transformed from worldly power to spiritual power.

Jesus’ temptations lead us to what areas of our lives need to be transformed. He had been led by the Spirit into the desert after his baptism and his identity affirmation that he was God’s Beloved Son. He needed to be stripped down to be spiritually strengthened for his role of living in to his true identity. After forty days and forty nights of prayer and fasting, he was hungry. The tempter challenges his identity, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to be bread.” Jesus knew that he did not have to defend His identity. He knew he did not have to prove himself to the tempter that he could do miracles. He also did not have to take the path of the Israelites in the wilderness who complained about not having bread to eat, not trusting that God would care for them. In spite of his hunger, he responded, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” God’s word, that had reassured him in the wilderness of who he was and what he was to do on earth, sustained his body. He did not have to take the easy, comfortable way out. Just as his time in Gethsemane helps us to see his humanity, fear and pain in facing the torture he knew was coming on the cross, both here in the desert and there in Gethsemane, he agreed to submit his will to his Father’s will, no matter what the cost.

We are tempted every day to take the smooth road instead of the narrow one Jesus takes. We are tempted to choose comfort and not evaluate how the values of our culture of greed, consumerism, racism, militarism and destruction of our environment for our comfort have sabotaged our spiritual discipline. Jesus faced his hunger and put God’s word first. He knew he was to listen to and to love God and love his neighbor before all else.

God’s word challenges us to not put comfort and consumerism before love of each person on this earth and following Jesus. Jesus did not even have a home during his ministry. He traveled to where the Spirit led him, to the people God put in his path, and caused spiritual transformation in everyone who heard his words and followed what he said. There were those who could not bear to follow, like the rich young ruler, who could not sell all he had and follow Jesus. Was there too much worldly security and prestige for him to trust God enough that he would be taken care of, that he would be alright if he followed? What gives us comfort and safety in our lives that is holding us back from following Jesus? Can we move from comfort and safety to spiritual power and follow Him? How can God’s love and word in our lives transform our need to be comfortable?

Then the tempter took Jesus to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. Again, he challenges his identity, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written “He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so you will not strike your foot against a stone.” The tempter uses God’s word itself to tempt Jesus to do something miraculous, to show his power to the people, to impress them so they would follow him. Jesus responds, “It is also written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” This is from Deuteronomy, referring again to when the Israelites in the wilderness asked Moses to give them water, because they were not trusting God to provide it for them. Jesus knows all that he needs to do in his life is to follow the path of his Father. He is not going to take the easy path to reveal himself to the people with such a miracle of being saved by angels when he jumps off the temple. He knows his life and miracles are to be for healing people, transforming their minds and hearts, to demonstrate what God’s power can do in their lives, not to impress them. He chooses the narrow path that is servanthood, that will lead to his torture and death, but eventually to his resurrection. We face the temptation to impress the world by what we think is important. Do we try to impress with our education, our accomplishments, our ministries, our spiritual gifts, our Church of the Saviour spirituality? How easy it is to get into this worldly view of ourselves, forgetting that Jesus’ narrow path was servanthood. He knew that everything he said and did was guided and directed by his Father. All our gifts and accomplishments in our lives are from our Creator God, and all our ministries are from the Spirit’s power. If we trust Jesus and God with everything in our lives, we do not have to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think or try to impress others with what we have done.

The tempter then takes Jesus to a very high mountain and shows him

all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. And said “All this I will give you if you bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away from me Satan! For it is written ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.’”

We can only imagine the beauty that Jesus saw of “all the nations of the world and all their splendor.” Satan is giving Jesus an unreal vision of the nations. Satan shows only their beautiful buildings and creations, their splendor, to try to entice Jesus in to succumbing to worship him. Satan does not show the people’s suffering and oppression that he creates.

We as followers of Jesus can be so easily drawn into worldly power. Our country is the world’s greatest and wealthiest militaristic empire, serving Satan for greed. We can be drawn into our leaders’ views that we are involved with wars to fight for democracy, or to prevent nuclear proliferation, or to prevent proliferation of communism. The countries we have involved ourselves in militarily or politically have been destroyed and decimated. We have started wars to get control of the resources of the nations we attack, such as oil in the second Iraqi war. Our corporations go into other nations to get their cobalt, their lithium, their oil. They destroy the communities where the resources are located and destroy the health of people, their land and their water. We are called to listen to our brothers’ and sisters’ cries for freedom from this oppression. We as followers of Jesus are called to be peacemakers. We are called to be transformers of this militarism and greed.

We are also called to change the systems of this world that cause oppression for those who are considered “other” in each society. White supremacy in the US is blinding to us who are white, if we do not hear our black and brown and LGBTQ, physically and mentally challenged brothers and sisters and their calls for justice and equality. I am deeply grateful to all our black and brown brothers and sisters in this community who have shared with us their experiences and have challenged me to see how I am hurting you or disrespecting you, so we can begin to dismantle this blindness in us who are white. You have shown incredible courage to be honest with us in this culture of white supremacy we all have suffered all our lives. It is a lifelong journey together in community to know white supremacy’s effects and heal them. Your trust has been a huge gift to us whites. It is transforming us to whom Jesus wants us to be.

I have been reading *The 1619 Project* in the last few weeks and have been angry at what so many of us have not known about the history of our country. Abraham Lincoln asked the African-American leaders in Washington DC to come to the White House where he told them that he was going to sign the Emancipation Proclamation but that he wanted all the freed slaves and black people in our country to go back to Africa. They respectfully did not respond at that moment, but made it clear later that they did want to go anywhere. They wanted to stay in their country. Lincoln was blinded by the worldly power of white supremacy.

We know how powerful our black and brown brothers and sisters are by their incredible gains they made after the Emancipation Proclamation, during Reconstruction, before they were squashed by white supremacy and laws that limited their roles in all areas of their lives. In *The 1619 Project*, Nikole Hannah-Jones writes,

Black Americans, exerting their new political power, lobbied their legislators to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the nation’s first civil rights law and one of the greatest pieces of civil rights legislation in American history. … The South, for the first time in the history of this country, began to resemble a democracy, with Black Americans elected to local, state and federal offices. Some sixteen Black men served in Congress — including Hiram Revels of Mississippi, who became the first Black man elected to the Senate in 1870. … More than six hundred Black men served in Southern state legislatures, and hundreds more in local positions.” (p. 28-29).

She also explains how

Public education effectively did not exist in the South before Reconstruction. The white elite had sent their children to private schools, while poor white children went without an education. But newly freed Black people, who had been prohibited from learning to read and write during slavery, were desperate for an education, which they saw as integral to true liberty. So Black legislators pushed for a universal state funded system of schools — not just for their own children, but for white children, too.

They also helped to pass the first compulsory education laws in the region. “Southern children, Black and white, were now required to attend schools the way their Northern counterparts did.” (p.29) However, when President Hayes, in order to win his election with white Southern support, agreed to pull the remaining federal troops out of the South, “white Southerners quickly went about eradicating the gains of Reconstruction.” (p.30)

We lost the brilliance and the gifts of our Black brothers and sisters by white supremacy, which shrinks all of our national, spiritual, and human possibilities. This is why we need to continue to dismantle all the laws and systems in this country that limit our black and brown brothers and sisters, and all the problems that we whites still struggle with that are from white supremacy. Think of where we would be in this country if Reconstruction had continued to blossom and our black brothers and sisters had been able to continue to push for their vision of what this country could be.

This is a poem by Michelle D. Stradford in her poetry book Arising:

Sun burnished Cameroon skin  
Cover over these  
Native American bones.  
European heritage flows  
Through the crimson blood  
Feeding the sinewy muscle  
Once riddled with bullets,  
Whipped by cowhide  
then strung up  
and drained of life

This ancestral concoction  
Fueled the determination,  
And stoic fortitude,  
That survived bondage  
Withstood rape,  
Inhumane slaughter,  
In the fight for freedom.

It spawned brilliant  
inventions,  
solutions to problems,  
despite the spurn,  
burden of disdain  
As the face of the lowest  
rung of society.  
Yes, still moved generations  
upwards, forward.

Why is it that you believe  
harsh words, ridicule,  
division, organized action  
and brutality could lessen,  
dismiss my intensity  
diminish the evolution,  
of this mix of great global nations,  
origin of majestic ethnicities,  
full potency, top blend,  
my strong  
persistent strain  
of DNA?

I wrote this to ask for forgiveness for all our sins from white supremacy and worldly power:

Forgive us our destruction of your wise ones in this land before we came  
We ignore their deep connection to our earth  
They can save us from our greed.  
Help us to listen.

Forgive us our destruction of your people from other lands  
we continue to shackle and chain.  
They stand strong in spite of us.  
Help us to stop.

Forgive us our pride in what You give us  
We think it is our power  
When it is Yours  
Help us to know Your Presence.

Forgive us our white blindness.  
We think it is truth  
When it is darkness  
Help us to see.

Forgive us our violence  
We disguise it with light.  
We want Your peace.  
Help us to act.

Psalm 32, attributed to David, makes it clear to us that confessing where we have fallen short with God opens to us all the gifts God has to give us. He begins with his understanding that we are truly blessed because we have a God who keeps forgiving us when we ask. We have a God who does not hold our sins against us once we have received God’s forgiveness. David is struggling with his sin, feeling the weight of it. It is so heavy he feels he cannot share it with anyone or with God. His body suffers because he is holding his sin inside, instead of releasing it to God. He has no strength. His sin is killing his body and his spirit. We need to take this so seriously when we look at the temptations we have in our lives, and how we can lose our health and our strength of body and soul when we are not aware of the obstacles that cause us to be walled off from God’s fullness of grace. We need to take this so seriously when our nation is so blind to its oppression inside and outside the country, and its systems of social media based on greed, all of which are destroying our people, and so many across the world, so that our nation is weighed down and suffering. If we do not confess our sin individually, nationally and in this community, we will be weighed down and not flourish. Transformation is only possible when we face our demons, confess them, keep stripping them away, and act differently. Reparations have to be made in this country if true justice is ever to be realized.

With confession, we are able to clear out all the obstacles that stand between us and God. They may be estranged relationships, judgment of each other or ourselves, past sins we have not been able to give to God, or have not accepted God’s forgiveness for, pride, comfort that causes harm to others, white blindness, ways our culture has co-opted us. After confession of all these, God and Jesus stand there before us with love we can only imagine. We can be opened to God at such a depth, and we are given the path by God we need to take. The Psalmist shares that we then have a hiding place of protection when trouble comes. We have deliverance from obstacles put in our way by people or systems that are constructed against us or against others. Then the Psalmist shares God’s word with him. “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go. I will counsel you and watch over you.” If God is instructing us, teaching us the way to go, counseling us, and watching over us, what do we have to fear? We are transformed from worldly power to God’s Spiritual power. All we need to do is to see God’s presence, hear God’s words, listen to God’s guidance, and ask for the courage to act.

Kent and I were just falling in love and I was having terrible anxiety about losing him, probably because Harvey, my first husband had died and I was afraid Kent would die or I would lose him to another woman. I had terrible fears and jealousy of him talking with other women in the community. He went out to a conference in California and talked to me about meeting another woman where he had had dinner and walking with her on the beach. I was overcome with fear and anxiety that he would leave me I could barely stand it. That night, as I was unable to sleep, God came to me and kept asking me what I would give up in my life for God. “Will you give up Kent for me?” God asked. I sobbed but told God I would. Then God went through everyone that was precious to me. “Will you give up your son Daniel for me?” ”Will you give up your community for me?” “Will you give up your parents and family for me?” Each time I cried, and yet still said yes, I would. By the end of this biggest challenge God had me face so far in my life, I was exhausted and drained. But I was so clear that all I needed was God’s presence and guidance and love. I could handle anything else that I had to face.

Michelle Standford’s words show us the way in another poem:

I rendezvous with  
The stripped-down   
Version of me  
In the clarity before dawn.  
There in the quiescent still,  
I face and reckon with   
The unfiltered,  
The raw and teachable me.

I arrive early to meet up   
with my maker  
to pray for serenity,  
inspiration,  
the capacity, guts to do  
something meaningful  
and contribute to the world.

I show up to harness  
This feeling again and again.  
These are the instances  
when I believe  
most in myself,  
that I can do anything.  
I thrive because  
these moments   
fulfill me.