

February 5, 2023 Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

First John 3:1-3

"Gerunds of the Church: Transforming"

Douglas T. King

"I am a work in progress," an older member of a previous congregation of mine announced to me as I sat by her hospital bed. She went on to quip, "But these days it seems like a whole lotta work for just a little progress." Her million watt smile, more than eighty years in the making, lit up the room and we both laughed.

She talked about how she thought when she retired, now many years ago, she was done with her learning and growing. But she had discovered that the process never stops. As she lay there in that hospital bed, one of many she had been in over the past few months, she said that she had gained the valuable wisdom that everything that happens in life, no matter how challenging, can be used in preparation for what is to come next. She said, "God isn't done with me yet." The look in her eye told me that she gained immeasurable strength from that truth.

This morning is the third in our sermon series on the gerunds of the church. Today we will be considering how the church is called to be about transforming.

Our text this morning, from the first of John's letters, is an apt scripture passage for this conversation. We get this wonderful line, "See what love the Father has given us that we should be called the children of God and that is what we are." This verse reminds us we have an identity beyond what we do for a living, beyond our roles as spouse, parent, or friend. The text goes on to say, "The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him." Just as the world struggled to comprehend the depth of whom Jesus was, we have similar depths beyond what is often perceived. The many labels the world puts upon us and frankly we put upon ourselves, do not represent all of who we are.

The author of First John then goes on to write, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed..." That faithful woman in the hospital was correct for all of us. We are all works in progress. God is not done with any of us; not done revealing the depths of whom we truly are. We are on a journey to becoming whom God created each of us to be.

Not a single one of us is deserving of being placed on this journey. We may dress up pretty on a Sunday morning but each of us has our own cocktail of weakness and folly which makes us far from perfect people. But each Sunday at that Baptismal font we

are told that God has forgiven us all our failures and is leading us beyond them. And not merely in some limited way of expunging our past culpability. No, it is bigger than that. We will be transformed. Christ is leading us forward through this life, and even through death, on to a place where our identity as the children of God will be writ large upon all of whom we are.

My friend Tom Are, the Senior Pastor at Village Church in Kansas City, tells a compelling story of a funeral at which he presided. Funerals are a time when we are reminded of the promise of eternal life. But they are also a time when we celebrate the life of the person who has died. Oftentimes there are glorious stories to be shared; tales of a loving and generous wife, or of a compassionate and goofy father. This past week at a memorial service I heard the tale of a loving mother, who when times were tight for her family, created a vast variety of dinner menus from canned Spam of all things. These tales warm our hearts and inspire us to want to be better people. But no one is perfect. And sometimes that imperfection cuts deep.

Tom's story is of a service for one of those deeply, deeply imperfect people. It is a natural reaction for a preacher in such a circumstance to want to sugarcoat the person's life; to

carefully edit their description in such a way that they paint the person as a saint in this life, regardless of how far that was from the truth. But the man who had died had been horrible to his children and there was no way to get around that fact. Tom knew that those now adult children would be sitting in the front pew when he got up to speak about their father. He just could not stand up in that pulpit and lie to them.

But what to do? Tom told the truth. He acknowledged the ways in which the man had failed during his life. He named how the man's behavior had deeply hurt those closest to him. But Tom also spoke another truth. At that funeral Tom shared an eternal truth. God was not done with that imperfect man. As broken and as failed as he was in this life, he was and is and always will be a child of God. What he will be may not have been fully revealed in this life. But God is not done with him; not done leading him into the person he was created to be. And this truth is a remarkable gift to that imperfect man, a remarkable gift to his children, and a remarkable gift to each one of us in our own imperfection.

God is not done with us yet. This significant truth plays two ways. In our moments when we feel like we are not measuring up in our lives; when it seems as if we are not a good enough spouse, or parent, or friend, or person; this promise

that God is not done with us brings us the compelling comfort that we are being led to an identity beyond our shortcomings. We are being led to becoming the people we were created to be. On the other side of the equation; when we are feeling fairly self-satisfied; when we believe we are doing a pretty darn good job with our lives; when we think we have it all figured out; this truth, that God is not done with us yet; is a tap on our shoulder; a humbling reminder that we are far from the perfect people we sometimes convince ourselves we are.

The very same truth can both bring us comfort, recognizing our potential for change, or challenge us to recognize that change is needed. But either way, God is not done with us yet.

"We should be called the children of God and that is what we are." I do have a quibble with this wonderful line calling us the children of God. It stems from the limitation of the language we use. Being referred to in the plural, "children of God" could imply that we are all lumped together into one big pile of humanity claimed by God. And God not being done with us could suggest that we are all on a journey to become some sort of homogenized saints. All in right relationship with God and all utterly the same.

I don't believe anything could be further from the truth. The medieval theologian Duns Scotus spoke to this. He argued

that God does not love us collectively as a bunch of humans, but individually. Scotus believed that in creating each person God does not start with some general human and then sprinkle a little superficial variety on top for entertainment purposes. God has created each one of us, from the very start, as radically individual and unique, and loves us to our core for who we are in the depths of our idiosyncratic individuality.

There is a story of the great teacher Rabbi Zusya. When Rabbi Zusya was on his deathbed, his students found him in uncontrollable tears. They tried to comfort him by telling him that he was almost as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham. They told him that surely he would be judged positively in heaven. Zusya replied, "When I get to Heaven, I will not be asked 'why weren't you more like Moses?' or 'why weren't you more like Abraham?' They will ask, 'why weren't you more like Zusya?'"

What has yet to be revealed is each and every one of us. in all our glorious individuality. We will be revealed as distinct reflections of the divine because we were each fashioned with painstaking precision by our creator to reflect from whom we came.

God is not done with you yet, not done with you, or you, or you, or you, or me. Susan, you will be made perfect in all your

Susan-ness. Mike, you will be made perfect in all your
Mike-ness. Barbara, you will be made perfect in all your
Barbara-ness.

For the church to be the church, we must be a community of
faith that recognizes and encourages the journey from the
imperfection of our current state to the glorious destination we
have been promised. The divine is ever inviting us to be
lovingly transformed into whom we were always created to be.
Each of us is remarkably distinct and each of us a reflection of
the one who created us.

Recognizing this God-given reality, in this place we need
to be patient with each other's current imperfections. We need
to encourage each other's journeys. We need to honor each
other's individual identities to which we have been called. We
need to believe in transformation.

God is not done with us yet.

Thanks be to God. Amen.