

Easter Sermon Series: *It Doesn't Happen Overnight- "Cocoons and Coal"*

Salem United Methodist Church

John 15: 1-8; Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21

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Rev. Sue Shorb-Sterling

During this Easter Sermon series we have been exploring the new life Jesus offers us through his Resurrection. This new life is sometimes referred to like a bulb that grows into a flower, a seed that grows into a tree, or a cocoon that grows into a butterfly. This new life is a process and doesn't happen overnight.

When I planned this sermon series during Lent, I planned to talk about metamorphosis that is the transformational process of a caterpillar turning into a chrysalis and then being changed into a butterfly. This process is often referred to by Christians as the transformation that happens in the life of a Christian. God can take us from lowly, crawling creatures and turn us into something beautiful that soars to the heavens. Our life in Christ is a transformational process similar to a butterfly's. Our old life does not look anything like the new life we receive in Christ.

But then this week, our trustees began to dig out our old furnace in the crawl space of this one hundred and five year old building. Do you know what they discovered? Coal. This church at one time had a coal furnace. They discovered the window that was used for the coal chute and some nuggets of coal. And I began thinking once more about the transformational process. A butterfly doesn't become a butterfly overnight. It takes anywhere from a month to a year for the four stages of egg, caterpillar, chrysalis, and butterfly to occur, depending on the type of butterfly. So, too, the formation of coal doesn't happen overnight! It can take hundreds of millions of years! This hard, black piece of rock began as vegetation in swamps. When the plants died, they decayed in the swamp. However, these dead plants did not decay completely. The result is that they created a layer of peat. At this stage, peat can be cut out of the earth and used for fuel. However, if it stays buried and sediment accumulates along with high pressure and temperatures, the peat turns into lignite which is a soft brown coal. If the lignite gets buried deeper with increased pressure and temperatures after millions of year the lignite turns into either soft black coal known as bituminous coal, or hard black coal called anthracite coal. The degree of hardness depends on how long it has been exposed to increased temperatures and pressure. That's quite a transformation from dead vegetation to hard rock. We burn this rock to produce heat and light. Even though none of us use coal to heat our homes anymore, many of our power plants still burn coal to produce electricity. I've never heard our new life in Christ explained as a piece of coal, but it could be. Like the coal begins with dead vegetation, new life in Christ begins when we die to self. It is then that the grace of Jesus the Christ comes in and re-forms us into a new creature or a lump of coal ready to be burned to produce light. I can just hear the songwriters producing new lyrics, "I'm just a lump of coal for Christ."

If coal had been used for heat in the time of Jesus, he just might have used coal to describe our resurrected life. He might have made the analogy that he is the high pressure and temperatures. We would be the dead vegetation. But coal wasn't yet discovered. Instead Jesus looked over the landscape and saw row after row of grapevines which were being attended by the vine grower. Ah, he thinks I can use this image to help these humans understand their relationship to me and to my Father. So he compares God to the vineyard keeper. This farmer of the grapes checks each plant to see what branches are growing out of control. These kinds of branches jut out from the vine as a long, spindly shoots. These have no interest in producing grapes. They just want to be a spindly shoots. These branches take the energy supplied by the vine to grow longer and more spindly. These branch are all about the branches. They are not interested in the vine or growing fruit. So the vine dresser "dresses" the vine by cutting off these energy stealing shoots. However, the branches that stay close to the vine don't get cut off. They use the energy they receive from the vine to produce big, juicy grapes. Jesus describes our life in him with this metaphor of the vine. He is the true vine. We are the branches. How do we use the energy we receive from the vine? Do we use it for ourselves or to produce fruit for God, the vineyard keeper? Whether we describe the beginning of our life in Christ as a bulb, seed, caterpillar, dead vegetation, or a growing branch on a vine, we all begin somewhere in our journey with the Risen Lord.

The Apostle Philip we meet in the scriptures today has been changed from the person Jesus found in the town of Bethsaida three years before. For Philip this process began with following Jesus and took him to lead strangers to understand who Jesus is. Philip began listening to the teachings of Jesus, witnessing his miracles, living through the Crucifixion of Jesus and his Resurrection, and then receiving the Holy Spirit which

empowered him to preach. All of this transformed an ordinary man into a man who shared the Gospel openly to an Ethiopian stranger without any hesitation. Philip, a Jew who believed Jesus to be the Messiah shares this with a castrated man of a different race and culture. There is no prejudice. Because of this encounter, the Ethiopian chose to be baptized and follow Jesus. This Ethiopian man's life was changed. Tradition holds that he went back home and began the Christian church in Africa. The Good News of Jesus Christ spread from Jerusalem to Africa because the lives of these two men were transformed by this Good News.

However, sometimes we forget how the love of God through Christ has changed our lives. Those in the early church had this problem. Their leaders needed to remind them over and over again. This is the message of the first letter of John. We who have been born in God, transformed by God's love are to love others. If we love others than God's love will be made perfect in us. If we remain in God, God will remain in us. Sounds like the writer borrowed this line from the vine image of Jesus. The writer continues that we cannot say, "I love God" and hate a brother or sister. Can you say, "I love God?" Can you say to someone, "I love you as a brother or sister in Christ?" One cannot say, "I love God," and ignore one's brother or sister, either, but we do sometimes, don't we?

Rev. Rodney Hudson, who serves Ames UMC located in Baltimore's Sandtown area wrote in his blog this week that churches in the suburbs have ignored "the cries for help." But this week they are finally hearing and as a result are sending resources, as well as standing in solidarity with their sister churches in this community. He writes that Freddy Gray's death was not in vain. "It has opened the eyes of the world and forced it to see the true issues facing Baltimore." He offers these statistics of the Sandtown neighborhood: nearly 50% of the residents live below the poverty level, which is less than an annual income of \$25,000, 50% are unemployed, and there is a 77% high school dropout rate. This neighborhood has one of the highest crime rates in the state of Maryland. There is much frustration, despair, anger, and unrest from years of suffering from poverty, crime, neglect, and injustice. Hudson wrote that this has been a long time coming. It didn't happen overnight. Another UMC pastor, Rev. Michael Parker, who grew up on the same block with Freddy Gray, stated in an interview, that he felt that it was just a matter of time. "This city has been above 212 degrees for quite a long time with the cap on." He continued, "People are just tired of being tired. They're tired of feeling like they're not being listened to."

Through a grass roots effort, the UMC is being a presence of hope and light to the neighborhoods in West Baltimore in several different ways. First, both pastors and laity are hitting the streets listening to the people and praying with them. At Ames UMC gang leaders were invited to come and talk. What they discovered was that the gangs do not want the rioting. As a result of this dialogue, the gang members are now protecting the clergy as they walk the streets. Another way has come from The United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) which has given our Conference a grant to help the Baltimore churches keep their doors open and be a resource for dialogue, peace, and healing. These churches have become a safe haven for people to get some immediate assistance with not only with physical needs such as food, water, supplies, and a place to sleep, but also for their spiritual and emotional needs. As one pastor observed there are a lot of good people in this neighborhood who have been affected by the riots and looting. Because of the recent destruction there are people who are now unemployed or their incomes have been reduced because of the curfew. Our Conference has asked for health kits and food to give those in need.

The problem in Baltimore and other cities in our country are multilayered. All of us may have different opinions as to how this grew out of hand, how the situation should or could be handled, who is in the wrong, etc. etc. We can play the blame game, but none of this will right any of the injustices or create peace in these neighborhoods. We are the church, disciples of Jesus Christ. We follow his teachings. We are to be like Christ in the world. Rev. Rodney Hudson summed it up this way. "Indeed, it is during moments of crisis that people see God in the faces of the oppressed and have no choice but to live out the call of Jesus and serve." Resolving or fixing the problems in West Baltimore won't happen overnight, but we serve a Risen Savior. He is in this world today and he calls us as people who are in the process of being transformed to be agents of this transformation for others. Pray for Baltimore and serve in whatever way you can. Stay close to the vine. Produce fruit as we show love to our brothers and sisters in Baltimore.

References: "A Long Time Coming" by Rev. Rodney Hudson, <http://r0dneyhuds0n.blogspot.com>; "How Freddie Gray's Death Brought Gang Members And Pastors Together" by Erica Hellerstein, <http://thingprogress.org>; www.bwcumc.org