

## Context and Community

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego

August 5, 2007; The Transfiguration (Transferred)

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*Gracious God,*

*Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.*

*Amen.*

We observe and celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration today. We remember Jesus' journey to the mountain of glory and we remind ourselves that transfiguration is the point and purpose of the spiritual life. Our sacred text is chockfull of examples of what personal transfiguration looks like; here's one snippet from Paul's letter to the Colossians: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another... forgiving each other... Above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

So that's the goal – love that leads to perfect harmony – and now let's be real. These are sweet words when heard in church but it's not the easiest path to travel in daily life. The truth is, transfiguring forces work on us all the time; very few of them point toward the end Paul depicts. Advertisers, politicians, pundits, even preachers, all want us to endorse their world-view, see things their way, and follow their lead. We're buffeted by efforts to get us to change our thinking, feeling, deciding, believing, and buying. The motivation behind these efforts is not always loving or harmonious. Keeping our eyes on the heavenly prize, on the point and purpose of life, is difficult.

And, make no mistake, we are susceptible. We all like to think that we're deeply rooted, that we know ourselves well, that we can trust our best instincts and insights, but we do well remember that the human personality is highly malleable, easily bent. Some of you may recall hearing about the Stanford Prison Study of 1971. Two dozen students, all of them well-adjusted individuals, were randomly divided into two groups, guards and prisoners. They were placed in a jailhouse built in a basement at the university. The experiment intended to measure the impact of special conditions on human behavior. It was designed to last for two weeks but had to be shut down after just six days; patterns of cruel sadism and cowardly submission had quickly risen to shockingly high levels.

Phil Zimbardo, the researcher who designed the study, later said this: "In one sense, the Stanford Prison Study was like a Greek drama: it was pitting good people against an evil place, and the question was, who or what wins? The audience, and the chorus, want the people to win. We want humanity to triumph over evil; we want personal dignity and the individual's will to resist, to dominate.

The sad story, the sad conclusion, the sad message is that the bad situation won, and the good people lost.”

So let’s note that transformation is a value neutral term; radical change can happen quickly but it’s not always holy. Because of that, we remain humble when considering lofty themes like transfiguration. The religious personality is prone to think quite highly of its potential; I endorse that aspiration, but only after we’ve given serious consideration to that which must be overcome on the road to love and harmony. Left to our own devices, and deeply influenced by our social context, we don’t always answer to our better angels. There is a reason that we need and have a Savior.

But, rooted in true humility and gospel hope, let us also proclaim that holy transfiguration is not only possible but predictable for every one of us, especially when we stay close to the saints surrounding us. What happens if we turn the Stanford Prison Study on its head? What happens when we reclaim the godly power of context and community? Actually, we know what happens – we see the answer everyday in the recovery movement. When someone is addicted to a substance or a process, it’s very hard for them to get unhooked alone. A larger group is necessary, other people who have been through the same torment and have a new story to tell about life. This larger group sets the new norm. What had seemed normal becomes unwelcome while new behaviors that had seemed impossible are now expected. The shaping power of society is properly directed toward healing.

And that’s what the church is called to be about. We will not be transfigured on our own, in isolation. We need the power of God, of course, and we also need the support of faithful and loving neighbors. We need to be around people who embrace compassion as normative, who are kind out of habit, who are mature and wise, who know they’re forgiven and who know that they need to be forgiven. Love is contagious, virtue spreads like wildfire, graciousness is learned behavior. When we find ourselves in a godly community, and allow that community to reset our standards, the Spirit is set free in ways that seemed impossible when we insisted on going it alone.

And because we’re so deeply linked to one another, we may, at times, be called upon to step forward on behalf of our neighbor, even at some risk to ourselves. It’s good to stand together but sometimes we have to stand apart for the greater good. I mentioned earlier that the Stanford Prison Study was called off a day before it hit the mid-way point – here’s how that happened. Phil Zimbardo invited dozens of people to observe the experiment; one of them was Christina Maslach, an assistant professor at Berkeley and the woman Zimbardo had been dating for a short while. Zimbardo tells the story:

I had arranged for many people who knew nothing about the experiment to come down to interview everyone – our staff, the prisoners, the guards – to get a fresh

look, an outside impression, of what was going on in our study. When Christina came down that night, she observed the ten o'clock toilet run... Prisoners were lined up, guards put bags over their heads, chained their legs together, had them put their hands on each other's shoulder, and then marched, sounding out their ID numbers...

I looked up and said, "Hey, Chris, look at that... Isn't that interesting?" She started tearing up and ran out. I ran after her and said, "Don't you see that? Isn't that interesting?" She said, "No, it's not interesting, it's awful... It's terrible, what you're doing to those boys. I'm not sure I really want to continue to know you... I'm not sure I want to continue our relationship if this is the real you; you're not the person I've come to love."

This was like a slap in the face. She was saying that I had been transformed. I was looking at the same thing she was looking at and saw it as interesting human behavior under the experimental microscope; she was looking at young boys being dehumanized and tormented in my dungeon prison. At that moment I said, "You're right. I have to end the study." And we did, we ended it the next day.

It's clear that Zimbardo was twice transfigured – once when he got lost in the experiment and then again in his response to Christina's humane and heroic challenge. Their story makes the simple point: We need each other to stay on the right path and sometimes we need to speak a brave word to ensure that blessed outcome. That brave word led to a gentle peace and, by the way, a marriage of almost thirty-five years.

Saint Paul, in the same letter to the Colossians that you heard from earlier, wrote this: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which you were called in the one body... Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom... And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus."

May we glorify that name through love that leads to perfect harmony and the transfiguration of all. Amen.