

“Waking Up” by John Morris



Trinity

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Good morning. In Jeremiah 1:9, Jeremiah denied skill in oratory, and the Holy One's answer was that the words which he has to speak were not his own. The words were given to Jeremiah by God. So, I pray,

In her sermon last Sunday, Brenda pointed out that we've had two thousand years to accept the idea that holiness is an inside job, not a matter of following certain prescribed customs and rituals, or of being fortunate enough to belong to a particular chosen people or tribe. Holiness is about inner transformation. But this would have sounded bizarre and

possibly outrageous to the people of Jesus' time. And it may still sound bizarre to many so-called religious people, including, sometimes, me.

This morning I want to continue that theme and talk about *metanoia*, which is the Greek word used in the New Testament to describe this inner transformation. Literally, it means "change of mind," but for the Greeks the "mind" was not mere thoughts. Having a metanoia doesn't mean changing your opinion about something. And this deeper understanding of "mind" is reflected in the standard contemporary definition of metanoia, which points to "a change in one's *way of life*."

Now at about this point in my drafting process, I decided I would just have a quick search for the term "metanoia" in my file of previous sermons, in case I'd ever said something relevant about it before.

Oops. I found that twice before, in the last 5 years, I have preached exactly these thoughts, in nearly the same words, at some length. I was, in effect, rewriting the same sermon I had already rewritten once.

Yet I still feel called to preach about this. Are *any* of my insights new? And if some of them are not, would it be so bad to try to articulate them again? At this point, worrying about this, a bit of humility kicked in. I realized that my sermons have not engraved themselves on the minds of Seekers. It's not as if you all will instantly think, Dang, I remember that, he said the same thing on Sunday, September 17, 2017. So I will take the chance and sing my song about metanoia once again, with I hope a few new contexts and reflections.

And I'll start with this one, which I know I haven't preached about before. Our gospel today is the story of the Good Samaritan. Like the concept of inner transformation, the

message of this story has had a long time to sink in with us Christians. It's almost a truism by now. Is anyone still astonished at what Jesus is saying here? He's asking his followers to rethink what it means to have a neighbor, to be a neighbor. He wants them to "change their minds" about it. But as we've said, metanoia is really more than changing your mind. It's a challenge to *transform* your mind, and your heart, and your actions.

I'm guessing that the lawyer who challenged Jesus about eternal life, and whose questions prompt the story of the Good Samaritan, heard the story very differently than we do. Luke's narration is minimal, when it comes time for the lawyer to answer Jesus' question, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" Luke merely quotes the lawyer's answer: "The one who showed him mercy." And for us, who are so used to this bedrock Christian parable, it's tempting to hear that answer as a kind of simple, obvious QED – duh, who could possibly have thought otherwise, of course it's the Samaritan. But in fact, given how radical this idea must have been, how blasphemous even, I bet the lawyer's response sounded more like this: "It's . . . the . . . the ONE WHO SHOWED HIM MERCY?!?" The lawyer is absolutely astounded at what Jesus has shown him must be true. It's a really, really new idea. (And yes, I know it's possible that instead of being absolutely astounded, the lawyer was just pissed off to have been bested by Jesus, but I want to think well of him in this sermon!)

Moments of metanoia have many different descriptions and go by many names and images. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus uses the image of "being born again" to describe what he means. Plato, centuries earlier, asked his readers to picture a cave where the people can only watch shadows on the wall. (This would be more or less like living your life on your Zoom screen.) But one person gets up and looks outside the cave,

and finds a whole new world, lit by the sun, the true source of light. This person rushes back to tell the others. And we get the sense that some of the cave-dwellers hear this as good news, and some don't want to hear it at all.

Images of metanoia often involve the contrast of darkness and light, sleep and awakening, old life versus new life. I think the Wizard of Oz movie is another image like this. Dorothy awakens from her black-and-white world in Kansas to discover herself in technicolor Oz. What adventures! "Over the rainbow, the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true." If only she could stay forever! But she can't, she and Toto have to go home . . . but they are changed. And so is the way Dorothy values her humble not-very-colorful family. [perhaps elaborate] Then, of course, there's The Matrix, which has penetrated even the world of professional philosophers as the go-to metaphor for metanoia. I'm not a fan of the movie, but the idea is that we live in a false world given to us by our masters, but it's possible to literally awaken from it and see the truth, which is horrible. And once you do, you're empowered to do something about it – rather like Plato's former cave-dweller who's seen the light.

Notice how the theme of "and then you do something about it" runs through so many of these metanoia stories. Jesus ends his metanoia moment with the lawyer by saying, "Go and do likewise" – that is, he's saying, I want more than your awareness, I want you to change your behavior, even if it means changing your life. It seems that a genuine metanoia is not only unforgettable but also creates a mandate for change.

Now let's think about a very contemporary image of metanoia, the idea of "being woke." Here we're talking about a stark contrast between being asleep, and maybe dreaming, to having your eyes opened and being fully conscious of the world around you. If you ask Merriam-Webster what it means, you'll get this: "aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)." OK,

that sounds about right, though I think “actively attentive” is a little lukewarm. After all, the term has its origins in the urgent need of the Black community to stay vigilant to the dangers posed by negotiating a life in white-supremacist society. And if white people think of themselves as “woke” – and I’m not saying everyone at Seekers does or should feel this way – we tend to associate “wokeness” with a pretty strong commitment to work for justice and equality. Again, it’s more than just a change of mind.

I think that if you could somehow bring Jesus into awareness of our 21st century troubles here in the US, and tell him about “being woke,” having a brand-new awareness of what we owe to our neighbors, he would smile a very wide smile and say, “Yes, you’ve got the idea. You must be born again. That Samaritan got woke. That lawyer got woke. A lot of your neighbors have *been* woke for many generations; it’s how they stayed alive. Now go and do likewise!”

I’m a little skeptical of saddling historical figures with contemporary opinions. I once knew a musician who was positive that, if Ludwig van Beethoven were alive today, he would start scoring all his orchestral works to include a Fender bass guitar. So with Jesus and being woke, please take what I’m saying as speculation and encouragement, a way to let your imagination play with some of the old and new ways of understanding God.

Brenda also talked about the resistance we experience to being transformed inside. “We like our illusions of power and control,” she pointed out. “It is not really the doing of the thing or taking the next step that we resist, but it is the illusion that we have created for ourselves that we want to protect.” I feel sure that this is true for the many opponents of “wokeness” as it applies to racial justice. When Katie and I were in Greenville, South Carolina, a few years ago, we were confronted with many examples of the persistent

illusions called “heritage” and “history” as things that needed defending against those who urge us to wake up. The brochure advertising a trip to the nearby Boone Hall Plantation enticed us with language like this:

“You see it. You feel it. Spanish moss sways gently in the coastal breeze on historic giant oaks. The world famous Avenue of Oaks forms a timeless corridor transporting you back in time to an era gone forever but never forgotten. Come experience history, beauty and grace. Come experience . . . Boone Hall Plantation.”

Or, more accurately, the Boone Hall Slave Labor Camp.

This is a powerful story that has been told and retold for a hundred and fifty years. The fact that it is noxious and untrue doesn't seem to matter. For those who grew up with it, it is an internalized illusion and thus very hard to let go of. And lest I sound too smug here, let me add that all of us white Americans, north and south, are still in the process of letting go of our illusions about whiteness, white privilege, and what it means to live with the legacy of the culture of enslavement. Hardly a day goes by when I'm not aware of some residual reminder, some illusory assumption, that is still with me out of my own upbringing as an economically privileged, straight, white boy in the most powerful country on earth.

Still thinking about illusions and resistance: Two weeks ago, you heard four of us Seekers improvise some mini-sermons about why we support CreatureKind, the nonprofit Christian group that advocates on behalf of farmed animals. We'll be hearing from Aline Silva, co-director of CreatureKind, later this summer, and we'll be having a community conversation about Christian responses to animal suffering. So I won't take a great deal of time in this sermon to introduce the subject. But I do want to suggest that we have another opportunity to listen to Jesus' words about being born again, about being a

good neighbor, and get ourselves woke around the issue of animal suffering. What is the illusion here that has to be overcome? It's not just a matter of dropping our mistaken beliefs about what really happens to animals in the so-called factory "farming" industry. As Brenda suggested, we also have to overcome some deep-seated illusions about ourselves, about what we "need," and our righteousness, our justifications. . . Well, to be continued.

The reading from Luke this morning also shows us a very familiar form of resistance, of clinging to inner illusions. The passage begins with the lawyer wanting to "test Jesus." So we begin with a sense of opposition, of conflict. And then, when Jesus compliments the lawyer on his understanding of the law, the lawyer isn't content to leave it at that. I think it's because Jesus doesn't just say, Yes, you've got it right; he also says, *Do this, love God and your neighbor as yourself.* Action is required. And this makes the lawyer uncomfortable in a way that Luke describes in plain, familiar language. The lawyer "wants to justify himself." He wants Jesus to agree with him that what he's already doing – his current understanding of how to be a neighbor, and to whom – is correct. This is the illusion he's asking Jesus to leave in place. The lawyer wants cheap grace – he wants to be justified, and be complimented by this rabbi, without actually having to change anything in his life. And it's interesting to note that the Greek words "justify" and "justice" have the same relationship to each other as do our English words. The person who can justify himself is the person who is seen to act justly. Which would be pretty important for a lawyer.

Well, this illusion of personal justification doesn't hold up, and a few verses later we have the astounded lawyer realizing that it's mercy, not tribe membership, that matters to God.

I'll end this sermon with a confession. Getting older – heck, getting old! – has plenty of pluses and minuses, and overall they've balanced out for me, at least so far. But there is

one thing I really worry about. The older I get, the more I find myself clinging to the sense of self that I have so carefully built up, decade after decade. I remember what it was like to have experiences of metanoia, to be willing *and able* to change my life. Could I still do that now? Am I still ready to drop everything, let the dead bury their dead, and follow Jesus wherever he takes me? Not next week, or after I've attended to my personal needs, but right now. I don't know. One part of me prays that God won't test me in this way. Another part only prays for the courage to say Yes.