

Living in Community 2

Richard Dawson

21st June 2009

Romans 12¹⁻⁸/ Matt 7¹⁻⁵

There was once a university which offered amongst other things a course in ornithology, the study of birds? This class in ornithology had the reputation of being the most difficult class in the whole curriculum. And the professor was an extremely difficult professor. Everybody feared him. But it was a required course, & every student had to take it. As the course began, the professor announced there would be a test in 40 days & it would compose a large portion of the final grade. So you had to do well on that test. Everybody studied. They took copious notes. They made sure they understood everything the professor said. On the 40th day the students filed into the lecture hall with sweaty palms, extremely nervous. On the stage was a table with 5 cages on it. Each cage had a cover & beneath the cover they could see the feet & spindly legs of a bird. At the sound of the bell, the professor addressed the students, "Here's the test. You can see there are 5 birds & they're all covered except for their feet & legs. You must tell me the identity of each of those 5 birds by looking only at their feet & legs." Everyone had studied long & hard, but no one had anticipated such a test and certainly hadn't been warned about this approach. So they were all sweating, trying to remember something, anything that could help them pass the test. Finally, one student stood up & said, "This is ridiculous. This is the craziest test I have ever seen so I'm leaving" With that he turned & walked toward the door. "Just a minute young man." said the professor. "Who are you? I demand your name right now." The young man stopped, took a long look at the professor, & then pulling up both of his pants legs said, "You tell me."

Tolstoy once said that 'Everybody thinks of changing Humanity and nobody thinks of changing Himself. The key to a transforming church is for us to be transformed.' But how are we transformed? Two movements are indicated by Jesus, both of equal importance. One is a movement of restraint – we are called to restrain ourselves, to restrain our behaviour, to restrain our thought processes. The other is a movement of **release**. We are called to do something, to be something, to believe something, to give our lives to something. The call to restrain is often prefaced by Jesus' words '**Do not!**' Do not judge, do not swear, do not resist an evil doer, do not draw attention to your giving or your praying, do not be a hypocrite.

This can seem like a very negative approach to life and it has certainly had bad press over the years. But the fact of the matter is that we engage in a series of 'do not's' every day without question. We learn, don't we, **not to** simply run across a busy road without looking. We learn, early on, **not to** touch hot surfaces, **not to** combined electricity and water, **not to** allow soap into our eyes. Behavioural restraint is simply a survival technique and yet, when we apply it to spiritual things we often get the reputation of being prudish and boring. And it can become this. We can become a very negative people focusing on a very negative approach to life. The corrective for this is to note what sort of things Jesus calls us to refrain

from. Rather than being particular behaviours or activities Jesus tends to focus on things which effect our relationships with both God and others.

In Luke 12 Jesus says,

¹⁵“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”(Luke 12)

Refrain from greed He says. Why? Because it leads to a life characterised by possession and this sort of life is not what we were made for. Take care, says Jesus, for your life. Take care in what your base your life on.

And this carefulness for our life becomes a major part of the transforming work of Christ. For some of us that will mean a considerable slowing down, a retraining of our minds and hearts to really think through the direction of our lives and the consequences of our actions. But for others it may mean quite to opposite. Some of us take so much care over our lives we have become unknown persons trapped behind a wall of insecurity and uncertainty. We take no risks, we are enslaved by the comforts we know and we use God as another sort of comfort blanket. This however amounts in the end to another kind of carelessness in that it ensures that we live a life with as few ‘cares’ as possible. In many respects it is a lazy life because it ensures we don’t have to care and yet Christ calls us into a life of caring, of **care-ful-ness**. And so often it seems to me that we’ve turned ‘**carefulness**’ into an art form designed to ensure that **we don’t have to care – that we live lives of sculptured carelessness!**

When Jesus says, ‘Take care’ He doesn’t just mean be a calculating person He means become a **caring person**. Shape your life so that it revolves around things that matter and carve off those things that don’t matter. We are to reject those things which Jesus rejects -**so that-we may care for the things that really matter**.

The second great movement of transformation we find from Jesus is the opposite of restraint. Instead of restraint God is calling us into a life of **release**. Instead of ‘do not’s’ we have a considerable series of commands. **‘Do these things...’** says Jesus and you will truly live! In this case Christ does not call us away from something but **in** to something and this is every bit as important as rejecting what Christ would reject. Often the best way to reject something negative is to fill our life with something positive. The Devil, as the saying goes, makes work for idle hands!

Paul says to us from Romans this morning...

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Roms 12)

It’s hard to say what is harder to do – to follow Christ in obedience or to obey Christ when He says don’t go there! Frankly I find both rather difficult. There is, however, no doubt that in transforming us God requires us to do both. It is not enough to live our life simply as a series of boundaries or walls behind which we exist as Christians. A transformed life isn’t one simply of ‘no’s’ but it is also a life of ‘go’s.’ To be

honest I suspect that the release side of the equation is the one we find more difficult because this so often means becoming a servant, giving ourselves to something and moving away from living a selfish life. We are a **sent people** which means we need to be looking outward and there are usually a couple of ways this will happen.

One is that we are called into caring by a passion Christ ignites in our hearts for someone or something. The other is that we acknowledge the logic of a calling **before** we discover our passion for it. Let me give you an example of each. Moses was a passionate man. He loved his own people and that passion led him to kill an Egyptian in the heat of anger over the oppression of his own. But then he had to wait many years before God called him into a productive ministry for his people. Passion wasn't enough. He had to wait for God's timing.

Paul also was a man of passion – a passion which led him to persecute the new church and to have its members jailed and even killed. For him this was a passion for God. God got hold of him and when he did it took 17 long years to turn that passion towards the right direction. But when he did, O what wonderful consequences.

Peter was more calculating. According to the Gospel of Luke it was an encounter with the power of Jesus that alerted him to God's reality and the fact that God was calling him. We notice from then on that this rather calculating instinct arises again and again in his life right up to the time of Jesus' trial where, despite being the natural leader of the disciples it is he who betrays Jesus openly much to his own disgust and shame. He is a natural calculator – he defaults back to this approach when under pressure. And yet, when restored to the inner circle by the risen Christ Peter throws himself into the task and leads the church in Jerusalem until his own crucifixion.

Whether you are lead by your passions or by your logic God will need to redeem both. Neither is sufficient to sustain our relationship with God. Both are required by God. Both balance the other.

The question to ask ourselves then is what is it we fall short on? Are we natural calculators, taking life step by step, reducing risk, avoiding embarrassment? Perhaps we need an injection of passion, perhaps we need to listen to our heart a bit, discover what we really care about or what God really cares about. ON the other hand perhaps we are natural passion junkies – always rushing in where angels fear to tread. Perhaps we need to learn to listen a little bit more, slow down, not assume quite so much – calculate a bit more.

The key, however, is to allow them to be used in the service of God. If you are a passionate person, allow your heart to be wrecked by something God cares about. If you are a calculating person, do the right thing, give yourself to a cause which is God inspired and then watch God invoke your passions in aid of your careful calculations.

One of the great problems in regard to transformation is that it requires change and we humans are often quite allergic to change. The Clerk of Abbingdon Presbytery once prayed this prayer many years ago, 'Lord, help us to be right, for you know how hard it is to change.'

I've found that the easiest way to change is to give ourselves to what is right. Often this means serving something other than ourselves but it can also mean giving ourselves to a process we know we need but are afraid of. [Story of me changing direction at university. Discovered a new life in choosing something I didn't really want to do]