

## “Transformed”

Exodus 33:12–23 and Romans 12:1–2

Julie R. Harley – October 16, 2011 – First United Church

I have a shelf of books about stewardship in my office. Together, they describe five reasons why people decide to give money to the church.

1. **They believe in the mission of the congregation.** The work of the church brings value to their lives and makes a difference in the world.
2. **They respect the staff leadership of the congregation.** People give more when they trust the pastors and staff.
3. **They have confidence in the fiscal stability of the congregation.** Finances are well managed and transparent.
4. **They give because they are asked to give.** Churches receive more charitable gifts than any other organization because we ask for contributions every week.
5. **They give because the leaders of the congregation model generosity.** Giving is inspiring and infectious.

All of these statements are true. These are the rational reasons for giving to the church.

And of course many of us pledge to the church because of all the things the church **does**. When you think about it, the church is a place for Bible study and Christian formation, a community center, a social club, a service group, a performing arts center, an intergenerational program, a museum of sacred history, a coffee shop, a comedy club, an advocacy group for peace and justice, a counseling center, a place for inspiration, a place for retreat, a healing center, and a house of prayer.

But underneath all of that, there is something much deeper, much harder to talk about. **We give money to the church because this is the place where we experience God’s intimate presence with us. This is the place where God meets us.**

The church is not just a place to **learn about** God.

## **This is the place where we meet God.**

The church is the place where we begin a lifelong relationship with God, where we can come to know God more deeply. And this is where our relationship with God is blessed, challenged and transformed.

In today's text, for instance, we overhear a conversation between God and Moses that is surprising because it is so personal. They talk with each other like friends.

But they are friends who have been through some pretty rough patches together. Already on this journey out of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites complain to God because they didn't have water to drink or food to eat. So God provides water from a rock and manna and quail to eat.

Then people begin to fight and argue with each other, and Moses is worn out from resolving all their conflicts. So he appoints judges to mediate between the people, relieving some of his burdens as a leader.

Then God gives Moses the 10 Commandments, to bring a system of divine order to the chaotic life of the Israelites. But by the time Moses descends from Mt. Sinai, the people have built an idol and are worshiping a golden calf.

God has finally had enough, and says, "Go to this land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go with you, because I would end up destroying you along the way since you are a stubborn people." (Common English Bible translation)

The people are ashamed of themselves after hearing God's harsh words. Moses doesn't know what to do with them any longer, he is so frustrated by their resistance.

They had physically left Egypt, but Egypt is still inside of them. Inwardly, they are still slaves to Pharaoh.

They want to worship gods of metal and stone, as the Egyptians did. They want their lives to be ordered and predictable. They do not want to let a God whom they cannot see lead them through the unknown, through the perils and terrors of the wilderness.

And at this point, God is ready to give up too.

So God talks with Moses and says, “I’ll send an angel to go with you on the journey. As for me, I’m too angry to go with you. How long will it take for the people to trust me?” God is losing faith in the relationship.

Now this could have been the end of the story. God could have walked away, and the Israelites could have been just another band of escaped slaves who perish in the desert.

But something happens in this story that changes the ending. **Moses refuses to give up on the relationship.**

Moses enters the tent of meeting and begins to talk with God like a friend, face to face. The tent of meeting is pitched outside the camp where the Israelites lived. Moses would go there every day to meet God, and a cloud would stand over the tent to show people that God was present in that place.

At this turning point in the journey, Moses enters the tent and asks God: **Will your presence go with us? If not, I don’t want to go to the Promised Land.**

God responds: **My presence will go with you and I will give you rest.**

Moses is not satisfied, perhaps not quite believing God. So Moses asks again: **We need your presence with us. That is what makes us different from all other people.**

God responds: **I will do this. You have found favor in my sight, and I do know you by name.**

Moses then goes one step further, asking for something no human being had had the chutzpah to ask God to do: **Please, as a visible sign of your promise, show me your glory.**

And God softens. God’s anger subsides. God realizes that this is an incredibly deep relationship, that they have come too far to turn back now. God sees that Moses needs the divine presence on this journey. But is it possible to grant Moses’ request?

No person can see God’s face and live. If we could see God’s face, faith would be turned into sight. By definition, it would no longer be **faith**.

**If we could actually see the face of God, we would have no choice but to believe in God. For God to be fully present to us would be coercive; it would eliminate our free will – which is at the heart of what makes us human.**

So God makes a very critical decision. God moves to preserve intimate presence with us, while also honoring Moses' ability to make his own choices.

God says to Moses: **My goodness will pass before you. My name will be proclaimed in your hearing. I will be gracious and merciful, kind and compassionate. But you cannot see my face and live.**

**Stand on the rock, and I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and I will pass by you, and then I will cover your eyes with the palm of my hand. When I take away my hand, you will see my back . . . you will see my glory . . . but you will not see my face.**

And so God and Moses begin to restore trust in one another. Both become vulnerable. God is revealed to Moses in glory, and they are fully present to one another. **God meets Moses in glory.**

The next day, Moses goes back up Mt. Sinai. He asks God to forgive the stubbornness of the Israelites. The two partners renew the covenant with the people Israel, and Moses makes new tablets to take the Commandments to the people. The relationship is both restored and transformed. Moses walks down the mountain, and his face shines with light, and the people know he has been with God.

**This renewal of their relationship, this restoration of their covenant bond would not have happened if Moses had not gone to the Tent of Meeting to spend time in God's presence.**

How often we take worship for granted, treating it like an optional activity in a week filled with a plethora of choices.

We forget that God took a huge risk in meeting Moses in that Tent of Meeting. God became vulnerable to Moses, speaking to him like a friend, allowing Moses to transform God's own plans.

We forget that God took a huge risk in sending Jesus to dwell among us in human flesh, full of grace and truth. The word for “dwell among us” in John 1:14 is the same expression for “pitching a tent.”

Jesus pitched a tent in this world, making himself vulnerable to the powers and principalities of the world so that we might see God revealed in him. Jesus became in his body the Tent of Meeting between God and humankind.

The Apostle Paul uses this same image in 2 Cor. 5:1–5, saying: “When the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a house from God, not made by hands, eternal in the heavens.” In Paul’s theology, **our bodies become the Tent of Meeting**, the place where we experience the glorious presence of God. Our bodies can be a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, when we allow God to be present within us.

It’s easy to treat the church like another not-for-profit organization, doing good work in the world. If that were all we were, the church would merit a contribution on a par with what we give to a charity.

But this church is much more than a worthy cause. You see, this church matters to God. Our text tells us that Moses’ relationship with God shaped the future of Israel and also the future of God. If Moses had not talked with God as a trusted friend, if Moses had not pleaded for God to go with them on the wilderness journey, the people would never have reached the Promised Land.

Even God’s future is open-ended. Even God faces possibilities, because God has chosen to partner with humankind to bring about God’s purposes in the world.

**This means that our actions, our responses to God, will determine God’s own future.** What God can do depends in part upon what we will do.

We are no longer slaves to Pharaoh. We are partners with God. It is the presence of **God with us** that empowers us to turn away from other gods, such as wealth, entertainment, military power, national pride, and everything else that rivals God for our ultimate trust and loyalty.

Over the last several years, this congregation has taken some courageous steps to go beyond talking **about** God to truly be in a **relationship** with God, a partnership with God.

In 2007, during a time of turmoil, we adopted as our wildly important goal to nurture and sustain a spiritual framework for our ministries.

In 2010, during a time of discernment, we adopted a 2020 Vision that describes **God's desire for our future**. One of our vision priorities is moving from individualism to an **intimate relationship with God** and our neighbors.

In 2011, during a time of generative leadership, our Church Council adopted as its priority for the year: Building relationships that bless, challenge and transform . . . with God, one another and the world.

Today we are invited to pledge our commitment to deepening this relationship with God by making a financial pledge. Money is not the only way we commit to walk with God, but Jesus said: Where your treasure is, your heart will be also.

When our heart is in a relationship that truly matters, we willingly surrender many things:

- We give up some of our freedom
- We share our power
- We risk our trust, not knowing how the other will respond
- We have honest conversations, rather than superficial chatter
- We open our hearts in tender vulnerability

Today's text shows us that God has entered this world fully, and taken risks for the sake of the world . . . because God our God is a God of relationship.

And by the end of the Exodus story, all the people saw God's glory. The Lord's cloud stayed over the dwelling during the day, with lightning in it at night, clearly visible to the whole household of Israel at every stage of the journey. (Exodus 40:38 – CEB)

As you make your stewardship pledge today, be not conformed to this world, but be transformed . . . knowing that we **pledge money to the church because this is the place where we experience God's intimate presence with us. This is the place where God meets us.**

**This is the place where we meet God. Amen.**

(This sermon was inspired by Terence Fretheim's book *The Suffering of God*.)