Formation and Transformation: 
A Conversation on Racial Justice
Alanna Simone Tyler and Timothy Hart-Andersen
Sunday, February 23, 2020
Matthew 17:1-9

Tim Hart-Andersen (THA): Let us pray…May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Alanna, when you were assigned to preach Transfiguration Sunday, we had no idea your sermon would follow my three-part series reflecting on America’s racial history following our monthlong road trip through the South. I was honored you invited me to engage in a dialogue with you today to continue this reflection. I was intrigued by your insights on transfiguration as part of the formation and transformation of the disciples of Jesus, and how that helped you think about your own journey. So – thank you.

Alanna Simone Tyler (AST): Thank you for accepting the invitation, Tim. I thought we could take this opportunity to move from considering the narratives of the United States of America
and the PCUSA to offering our narratives. As we offer our reflections on faith formation and our racial identity I hope we are modelling the risk of sharing our stories. This is also our opportunity to talk briefly about what we hope comes next for Westminster.

Jesus and three of his followers, Peter, James and John, were on a pilgrimage. Before arriving on the mountain they travelled for six days through the region of Caesarea Philippi and it was a time of intensive faith formation for the disciples. Jesus and three of the disciples were called away from their lives in ministry. Up on the high mountain Peter, James and John watched as Jesus’ appearance changed. Their spiritual ancestors, Moses and Elijah, also appeared on the mountain. Peter spoke up and suggested he would build three places of welcome for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Then God’s voice broke into their experience and the disciples were afraid and fell to the ground. Jesus touched them and said, “Get up and do not be afraid.” Their fear passed and they returned with Jesus to their ministry down in the valley.

Up on a high mountain we are formed and have transformative experiences we cannot have as easily or as readily elsewhere. Away from the distractions, constraints and challenges of everyday life Jesus and the disciples reconnected to the Source of life and were reminded of God’s largeness and God’s power.

**THA:** Preachers tend to view the Transfiguration as a discreet, private encounter. They typically focus on Jesus and his experience. I know I have when I’ve preached on this text. You’ve
helped me see it as something broader, as part of the story of how the faith of the disciples was formed in their life together, and how their transformation began. The Transfiguration reaches back to ancestors in the faith, even as it meets the disciples where they are, and then sends them back into reality. All of us have mountaintop moments and everyday experiences that shape us. Communities and individuals help form us. What about your own journey of formation?

**AST:** Westminster, we are still getting to know each other. In the last 18 months since I arrived to serve as Associate Pastor for Justice and Mission you have begun to share your stories and I am glad to share a bit of mine.

I am the dream come true of enslaved persons some of whose names I know: Patsy and Gilbert, Gabel and Mary Jane. And many enslaved persons whose names I do not know dreamed of me. Their faith and hope were so strong it birthed me and sustains me even now. On my best days I am aware of the great cloud of witnesses surrounding me.

From both of my parents I learned about working hard, building a home, loving neighbors, sharing with others who have less, and being kind—even to siblings when they were driving you bananas. My paternal grandmother lived with us. I so loved being in her company. We shared a room in our modest house and we had our own little world. My parents valued being gathered with our extended family. My mother made a regular practice of calling on our older relatives and I eagerly joined her for any
chance to visit and listen to the stories from our resilient uncles and aunts who migrated from the south and established roots on Chicago’s Southside.

I am a daughter of the Southside of Chicago. Traveling around the Southside I saw institutions named for people of African descent who were significant figures in American history. My neighborhood library was named after Carter G. Woodson. This library housed the Vivian G Harsh collection of African American literature and culture. A welded bronze sculpture by Richard Hunt, *Jacob’s Ladder* mesmerized me every time I visited. My siblings attended Percy L. Julian High School; and dear friends attended Whitney M. Young High School. My younger brother played baseball with the Jackie Robinson West Little League.

Southside residents included African Americans entrepreneurs, nonprofit founders, educators, medical professional, pastors, construction workers, day laborers lawyers and judges, elected officials, and architects and engineers. And some of my Southside neighbors were people living in poverty.

I was very fortunate to be a student in school communities where teachers were invested and held great expectations for our academic success. Educators were highly regarded by the community. I walked to grade school with my siblings and other neighborhood children. At the one “busy” street we needed to cross we were met for 9 years by the same loving woman who knew all our names. The schools I attended imparted the rich culture of people of African descent. In fact, as we have been
preparing for this dialogue all this poetry has been welling up
and that is directly connected to the educators who shaped me.

I am a daughter of the black church—a daughter of Trinity United
Church of Christ. Christian faith came to me through joyfully
committed men and women who taught me to move through this
world as one who was unashamedly of African descent and
Christian. They taught me to remain ever mindful that God is our
source—has been our source, will be our source. They taught me
God is unbound and active and I could join God out in the world.
They considered opposing racial injustice to be the work of the
church. They had been influenced by African American
theologians who “asserted…the Christian gospel mandated [the
Church] placing social justice at the center” of the identity of the
church.¹ The Christian faith they modelled for me was neighbor-
loving and neighbor-serving. We talked about ourselves as being
“in the heart of the community seeking to win the communities
heart.” At Trinity I learned my faith called me to be a member of
the world community. A struggle taking place in another part of
the world was our struggle too. For most of my growing up years
there was a large sign in front of our church and it read, “Free
South Africa.” Our congregation was involved in forcing the
United Church of Christ to divest its resources. And the people
who raised me provided all kinds of good formation programs
(e.g., Saturday school, choir, scouts and youth group) were
offered to us and I loved going to church. I never had to be
coaxed. The voices of children and youth matter. Our gifts were
welcomed.
Tim, earlier this week you asked me what happened when I travelled outside of the community that nurtured and cared for me. I told you I carried home with me. I still carry home. I carry specific commitments and values from the people and the community who shaped me.

**THA:** My own journey does not seem nearly as poetic. Maybe that’s the result of my people not having to work very hard to find their way in the world. Life was fairly straightforward for my family. We were Mid-westerners. My mom was from Indiana, because her abolitionist ancestors were chased north out of Kentucky. Her mother, my grandmother, a faithful Baptist, was a devout Christian who called on the elderly until well into her 90’s. She was a key person in my spiritual formation. My dad was from a working-class family, immigrants from Denmark to western Iowa and Omaha, Nebraska, where he was raised. I was born in a small, all white, town in Kansas, where I spent my formative years. We eventually moved to the Chicago area, and I grew up in a largely white, thoroughly segregated suburb of that city. The railroad tracks demarcated the line between where whites lived and where blacks lived. Life simply unfolded for us wherever we were.

A friend of mine – also a straight, white male Presbyterian minister – says,

““This is one way to think about the nature of privilege. When the system works for me, without having to know how it works, that's privilege. When the system works for me without
having to do anything to make it work – except perhaps, to access it – that's privilege.” (Dirk Ficca, *A Seat at the Table*; presentation at Westminster 2/9/20)

That was my life. My formation in the America of the 1950s and 1960s could have remained in an encased, white bubble, ignorant of harsher realities, including those in Chicago where you would be raised. *Thank God for the church* and its willingness to go outside the bubble, to enter into broader struggles, particularly racial reconciliation. That’s where my formation and transformation with regard to systemic racism began.

My father preached about racial justice during the Civil Rights movement and was on the receiving end of rough response, from both the community and the congregation. I watched as he stayed strong in his convictions. Our high school youth group created relationships with children and youth in an African-American church on Chicago’s west side. We spent part of every Thursday in that community during my high school years. Those relationships changed us. We were there on April 4, 1968, with our friends, the evening Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed. We witnessed the anguish and the anger of the Black community up close as it began to swell in the streets.

Our recent trip through the South reconnected me to the formation I received earlier in life, and helped me understand my own transformation in coming to terms with my privilege as a white person in America. The trip taught me a lot about the roots of racism in our land, from the enslavement of Africans that
began in this land in 1619, and the invention of racial categories, to the mass incarceration of our time. Now I find myself with a community of faith that wants to continue the long struggle toward racial justice and equity, and I am grateful.

**AST:** Listening to our narratives I notice we have in common, Tim, the way in which the Church intentionally broadened our horizons. A distinction I hear in our narratives is the particular way in which my church community was a bulwark against the forces of racism. They invested their time and their resources to build a formation infrastructure that would prepare me and many others to move through the world with dignity, grace, joy and purpose and to stand firmly here in this sanctuary. I mentioned Austin Channing Brown to you; she’s a millennial and they are a generation who tells it as it is. The title of her book is full of equal parts truth and sassiness, *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*. My formative experience and Channing Brown’s are different but the aim of our formation was the same. Our families, congregations and communities wanted to instill in us an unshakeable sense of personhood flowing from being made in the image of God.

**THA:** Did you notice how *listening* played a key role in the Transfiguration account?

As Jesus begins to glow with an inner light of transformation, Peter says to him, “Lord, let’s stay here; I’ll make three dwellings here, for you, Moses, and Elijah.”
Peter is the do-gooder, privileged liberal who thinks he knows what is needed. Without stopping to hear from others, he wants to move immediately to resolve the situation. What happens next?

While Peter is speaking, suddenly a voice interrupts: “Peter. Stop. This is my Son...listen to him!”

God tells Peter to stop and listen. That moment and that call to listen first is so terrifying for Peter and the others that it knocks them over. That’s a lesson for Westminster from this formational text, if we want to work toward racial justice. It may not be the way we want to start, but it begins with listening to the stories of others, what Bryan Stevenson calls proximity.

As a congregation we have had practice in doing this. When I arrived here 20 years ago the denomination and our church were embroiled in a struggle over the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons – not only in the church, but in the world around us. Westminster wisely entered that struggle first by listening to the stories of our own members directly affected by exclusion and discrimination. We didn’t rely on polity or theology or really good arguments, but, rather, we listened and learned from our own people. We helped lead the change in our national church in what seemed to be – and was – a difficult, polarizing challenge. We can do the same with the struggle for racial justice.

**AST:** Westminster’s past experience with practicing deep listening is a good place for us to begin. It is one of the first
practices Westminster must rely on to work for racial justice. Along with listening, Westminster—all of us—will have to become comfortable with the discomfort that will likely arise when difficult truth is shared. Our work together must include reassessing our ways of being in community. We’ll have to commit to removing any deeply embedded, well-hidden patterns of privilege that we find. I am so grateful we do not do this work alone. We are abundantly prepared to do this hard work with gifts of the spirit. The Holy Spirit is present among us inviting us to rise and not be afraid.

**THA:** That’s how the Transfiguration story ends. The listening terrifies them and knocks them over, and then it’s followed by Jesus says, “Rise up. Don’t be afraid. Go back down the mountain and go to work.” That’s where our congregation is today. The Racial Justice Task Force reported to session last Thursday, and our elders had a good discussion of their work and their recommendations, one of which was to seek out opportunities to hear one another’s narratives.

Alanna, we’ve got work to do. We’re not alone in doing it – and that work starts with listening. Thank you for this chance to have a conversation – and thanks be to God.

Amen.

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