

MISSIONAL VOICES AND THE WORK OF THE PEOPLE

Transformed Through Love

Participating In God's Dream of Wholeness

Introduction

“God has a mission, God has a purpose, God has a dream. God wants to love this world so much that it is healed. God’s love heals and brings us back to wholeness with God with each other...We find these fancy words to say things that are very simple. And really to me, missional is another way of saying that God is up to something, God is up to healing this world and...loving us all so that we begin to live into the wholeness that God intended all along. The whole world begins to reflect that wholeness...as I look into Scripture and my own experience is God issuing this invitation over and over again...Join me in things that demonstrate love and foster wholeness in this world.” - Stephanie Spellers (From *Transformed Through Love Film One*).

God is active and alive and inviting. God has not stopped shaping humanity, we are works in progress—a wholeness process that we are made to respond to by our own transmission of Love on earth. That’s “mission” in a nutshell. Does conversion happen? Sometimes! Do people abuse grace and take and disappear forever? Sometimes! And yet, we risk loving (inside and outside of the Church) time and again because that is what the Teacher exemplified. We don’t have to be in the world in annoying, persuasive, fear-based, screaming and whining ways trying to change everyone’s mind about Jesus. Our job is to get out of the way enough to let God happen through us.

“The more [I participate in God’s Love] the less my ego is in the way, the more I do that, the better human being I am. The more I am acting the way I am created to act.” - Bob Leopold (From *Transformed Through Love Film One*).

The work of the people is to be willing and teachable enough to let God be God wherever we are, to be shapable by God and others. To be an open pathway to love and grace. To remember that as we encounter the hardships of this world, we are

learning to love as God loves. We are learning the privilege of love, we “get to” stand in the pathway of God and be welcoming. We get to give and receive love to one another.

This all sounds so simple, but it is hard work. Not all of us are aware we are in the wholeness process to begin with...we are stuck in difficult places and situations. We can easily get into an us/them mentality in these cases if we are not careful. We can start to feel like our mission is to save as many as we can. But, that is not always loving. Our job is to love regardless of circumstances and attest to where we are at in our wholeness process. God gets the job of transformation, and letting God do God’s job is a good idea.

In Tomball, Texas I work at a budding community center. We have a few houses that came with our new property, and we dedicated one to women’s sober living, and one we are in talks about using for the homeless. Plans are all in development, but as we started to align with God’s dream for these houses, I started to feel a darkening reality that I wasn’t going to be enough to resolve addiction or homelessness. I started to feel like I was drowning. In fact, I started to look for ways to sabotage myself just to prove that I was not equipped. I took on too much work, I lost track of time, I didn’t remember commitments. My body weakened, and I gained weight (proof that I took on too much!). It was when I was at the point of tears on the floor of my room that God reminded me that it’s not my job to change anybody, nor does anyone (including God) expect me to solve homelessness and addiction. My job wasn’t to make sure every soul I encountered was saved for all eternity, it was to offer them the same Love I am offered, however that looks, in real time.

My job was to be willing to invite God into the world through my human existence so as to serve from God’s fullness and not my own. Being present and extending love was on me, transformation was on God. It may still be true that God may save someone through a friendship with me, or lead them to wholeness regardless of my inability to do so, but it is nice to know that loving God’s people didn’t require me to be super human, rather just an in-touch one. In regards to mission...ours is to Love one another as we love ourselves.

Processing

These films ask some thought provoking questions. Welcome them as best you can. Whatever arises in you needs to be taken to heart. Follow the call inward, let these

prompts become pathways that wind you into the heart of God. Pick up what you need from the Eternal One and re-emerge as best you can as a loving presence in the world.

It may not serve you well to go through these questions hastily. Sit with them. Let them come alive in your heart. Use all your senses. Be yourself. Ask God. Just let the questions pass from your heart into God's. Don't over think this process, it just happens.

Trust. Wait. Listen. Trust.

Take up your journal and write, write, write.
Or pick up an instrument and play, play, play...sing, sing, sing.
Genuinely embrace the very next person you meet.
Do your thing with God, because this is good stuff.

This is the stuff that your faith life is born out of. Where your love and sense of justice come from. This is the knowing we are called by the Teacher into and sent out through as willing participants to share on and on. So...

May God's Love flow through you—dignifying, grace-filled, hope-orienting LOVE. And may you be inspired enough, to become party to the flow, to not hold on to any of it...don't hold back—give it.

Give it all away.
There is infinitely more.

Welcome, God

Come in, God, to our hearts and minds.
Teach us willingness and how to be teachable.

Enforce our own shedding, the dying of the false
to allow the rise of Truth—
a living, breathing, presence that always is.

Give us the blessing of knowing You.
Gift us the blessing of conducting Love on Your behalf
in courtrooms and classrooms.

in brothels and cathedrals
in our own backyards and overseas
let Your Love be known and shared!

This series was created in friendship with Missional Voices (www.missionalvoices.com) and the Episcopal Diocese of Texas and includes 3 sessions:

SESSION ONE // Transforming Through Love Film One

SESSION TWO // Transforming Through Love Film Two

SESSION THREE // Transforming Through Love Film Three

Film Participant Bios

*// **Stephanie Spellers** // Canon to the Presiding Bishop for Evangelism and Reconciliation*

The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers is one of the Episcopal Church's leading thinkers and consultants around 21st century ministry and mission.

The author of *The Episcopal Way* (the first volume in the new Church's Teachings for a Changing World series) and *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other and the Spirit of Transformation*, she serves as Canon to the Presiding Bishop for Evangelism and Reconciliation. Spellers is responsible for supporting the ministry of the Presiding Bishop and Primate of The Episcopal Church as it pertains to evangelism and reconciliation efforts at the local, congregational, diocesan, and churchwide levels.

She also teaches and directs programs in mission, reconciliation and formation at General Theological Seminary in New York City, and serves as a Senior Consultant for the Center for Progressive Renewal, an ecumenical consulting and training group that works nationwide.

*// **Jane Gerdson** // Missioner for Fresh Expressions/Praxis Communities*

Diocese of Southern Ohio - The Rev. Jane Gerdson is an Episcopal priest and is serving as Missioner for Fresh Expressions and Praxis Communities for the Diocese of Southern Ohio. She is a graduate of Mount Holyoke College and Episcopal Divinity School. Prior to seminary, Jane was a Montessori teacher and worked as a

Director of Religious Education. Jane served for five years at St. Andrew's, an inner-city church in Dayton, OH. In her current work she is exploring new forms of Christian community. She works predominantly with young adults and those who have been disenfranchised from the church in some way. She has a heart for those on the margins. She is also a wife and mother to two young children and loves yoga, gardening, and planning dinner parties.

// Jason Evans // *Young Adult Missioner*

Episcopal Diocese of Washington - Jason Evans is a Christian leader, writer, speaker, artist and musician. He studied at Heston College for a Certificate in Urban Ministry and Fuller Seminary for a Masters of Arts in Global Leadership. Jason is the Young Adult Missioner to the Episcopal Diocese of Washington DC.

// Sara Shisler Goff // *Co-Pastor - The Slate Project*

Sara is a native Marylander and a cradle Episcopalian. She spent a few years down south at Elon University getting her B.A. in Religious Studies. After feeling the “nudge” of God toward a calling to ordination, Sara went to seminary at Yale Divinity School and Berkley Divinity school in New Haven, CT, where she received her Masters of Divinity and Masters of Sacred Theology in Christian Ethics. Sara is currently working on her Doctor of Divinity through Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA; her doctoral work focuses on reimagining the church for the twenty-first century. Sara is a 2015-2016 Beatitudes Society Fellow. She is the chair of the Task Force for Leveraging Social Media for Evangelism, an Interim Body of the Episcopal Church's General Convention.

From 2010 to 2014, Sara served as Canon for Spiritual Formation at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Baltimore, Maryland. Until November 2015 she served as an Assisting Priest at Trinity Episcopal Church in Towson, Maryland. Currently Sara serves as one of three “co-pastors” of the Slate Project, a post-denominational Christian community rooted in the ancient, the arts, and the commitment to acting for social justice, located both in Baltimore, Maryland and online. The Slate Project asks what the church could be if it had a “blank slate” and is all about searching for “Christianity without the crap.” Sara and her wife Heather live in Baltimore with two crazy dogs and one unusually social cat. For fun Sara likes to go running, make pottery, write poetry, travel, and attempt to have a yoga practice. You can follow Sara on twitter at @revshiz and on her blog, theseekersway.com.

*// **Bob Leopold** // Missioner, Southside Abbey, Diocese of East Tennessee*

Bob is the founding pastor at Southside Abbey – a non-traditional worshipping community in the Episcopal tradition – a ministry led by the Holy Spirit of/by/for/with the people of Chattanooga’s Southside. The Southside is a diverse neighborhood with lots of historical and present challenges. At Friday evening worship, the bread and wine of Holy Communion bookend a shared meal. Through worship, community presence, and relationship-building Southside Abbey follows Jesus, loves our neighbors, and faithfully goes about the Gospel work of changing the world.

Bob is the 2015 Episcopal Church Foundation (ECF) William B. Given, Jr. Fellow, working to create a network of missional ministers through the Innovative Ministry Rounds project. He especially enjoys making presentations and teaching the next generation of lay and ordained leaders. Bob and his wife, Lisa, enjoy boardgames, Phish, travel, their neighborhood, making music, and, of course, this wondrous Jesus Movement. Bob is excited to return to VTS, his home for three years.

SESSION ONE

Watch Film

“Transformed Through Love Film One”

Going Deeper

This film asks deep-seeking questions that lead you inward and outward. Before you go with the first answer that comes to mind, breathe first. Breathe three slow deep breaths and relax into yourself. Wait for an answer to surface.

Who is God to you?

Think about how you have come to know God. Take a moment to reflect on experiences where God’s nature was revealed to you. Consider writing about it... what is God’s most influential characteristic? What do you believe about God’s heart for you? What, if anything, did God teach you about yourself? About others? Who is God to you?

What does God want?

We come to know what God desires through knowing who God is to us. There is no one-method-fits-all way to knowing God, but we have come to understand that knowing God is both personal and communal. What (in all that has been revealed to you about God) informs you of what God wants for you? For your relationships? For the world?

Do you believe God has expectations, hopes, or both?

What is God’s dream?

Does God dream? All that is created had to come from somewhere. God’s thoughts, God’s imaginings, we are part of that. We are all birthed *of God into* God’s dream with the opportunity to grow through God’s hope. Hope that holds us together while we learn how to reciprocate God’s love, and furthermore, to share it. Write what you believe God’s dream is.

How do we get in on God’s dream?

Have you ever considered God’s dream for you? For humankind? Beyond Earthkind? Spend some time in your preferred way of silence. Accept the invitation into God’s dream. Take your time, use all of your senses. Now that you have shown

up in God's dream, witness God's creativity! Discover! Co-create! Take some time after to write about your experience.

Reflection

God is up to the task of being God's self. Revealing Love as divine nature, God continues to invite us into an incredible dream. God is ultimately welcoming us into a process towards fullness and wholeness to become our truest self. It's as if God is saying, "I'll be Me, you be you. We are in this together."

Perhaps this doesn't sound super "missional", but coming to know who God is and who we are as the beloved is foundational to being a loving presence in the world. Outside of God, we give of our own means which are limited. From within God we can extend from Eternal depths. We have a greater understanding of what we aren't (and the grace we are given for that), and that helps us not to try to be everything for everyone, to get a savior complex and play God, or to close cathedral doors on people who need a loving community more than ever.

I think these questions give us the opportunity to till the soil we are planted in and see what we are growing out of. God's dream will come true. Love is on the move and beckoning us forward into alignment with what is to come. When and where we come in on it isn't as important as that we do get in on it. (see Matthew 20:1-16)

Further Contemplation

You may have taken notes or jotted down a word or phrase that stood out to you during the film. You can use that for a focused, centering prayer time, or consider one of the following that resonates with you today.

"God is Creator." "God is Sustainer." "God is the Energy of Life." "God is Love."
"God is Relationship." "God transforms." "God, show me" "God is near." "I am open"

Go in peace

to greet in love
and promote joy through acceptance

to show patience, goodness and kindness
to see others through hard times

to hold close without smothering,
to educate without ego

to give yourself into Me, to give yourself away...
for liberation's sake...

this is My love practice!
I came down and looked you right in the eye
to invite
to dignify

to bless from the Eternal depths of God
with Life and Love, Spirit and breath
and a Way for all who live fragmented lives
to become whole.

may you know this today,
may you know deep in your heart that above all...

I Love.

SESSION TWO

Watch Film

“Transformed Through Love Film Two”

Going Deeper

What is the mission of the Church?

What does the role of the church have to do with God’s dream?

Where do you see God at work in your faith community?

Are you in alignment with what God is doing?

How do you imagine getting in on what God is doing?

How can we as leaders and attenders “keep becoming who the Church is supposed to be: a beloved community, a place of healing” —Sara Shisler Goff

Reflection

Just like each of us are participating in God’s wholeness program, the Church as a body of “usses” is also invited into healing. As the receptive and responsive heart to God, the Church is called to evolve and serve alongside God’s movement in the world. When healthy, she (the Church) responds to the community by taking the weak to her breast, becoming a hospital and hospice for the sick and dying, and by birthing disciples of Love into the community (to name a few). She is capable of amazing, God-infused “stuff”. She is capable of growth and meant for transformation. This includes all aspects of belief that the Church holds about God and humans.

But as “usses”, she sometimes misfires. She can reflect fear and respond with attempts to control. She might build and then guard walls to keep people out and/or cultivate a privileged people group within. She might try to protect herself from heartbreak because heart-pain hurts. A lot. Her walls, though they secure us (and save us) in many ways, don’t serve hearts well over time for many reasons. Although they afford the blessing of safety to heal and grow from trauma and abuse, once hopefully and safely restored, those once-laid bricks that protected and brought us back to life can keep us from living well. They can trick us into believing that in our

weakness we need to be protected when in truth, weakness is the course instruction toward the courage it takes to risk loving again and again.

When a Church becomes a matter of numbers and figures, bodies and bills, then she is at a loss. Her soul is invested in God's transformational process. She is made to operate much like a heart, with God inflow and God outflow. This affords her the ability to "hold" people and "send" people. All people. When restored to God, and resolved of her place (what she is and what she is not) she is able to align with God's flow and allow God to do God's part. This liberates her from much of the morality soap boxing, ostracizing and political persuading she has grown into. Pray for the Church to awaken to what she is and what she is not so she can once again emerge in alignment with God's dream and love without fear, and give without losing.

"God's dream is for us to spread [the] kind of love and acceptance and compassion that most of us long for. The church participates in that by connecting to those who are different from us, to those who will teach us about how to love." - Jane Gerdsen

Further Contemplation

You may have taken notes or jotted down a word or phrase that stood out to you during the film. You can use that for a focused, centering prayer time, or consider one of the following that resonates with you today:

"I open my heart" "I am ready to emerge into You" "Loving big." "I am willing to be sent" "Teach me how to love" "God is everywhere" "God is at work" "Pull me together, God. Give me away."

Go in peace

I AM coming to heal my bride,
caring for her heart,
opening her passageways
clearing the resistance
to the flow of Love.

Her openness becomes a beacon of Light,
Her willingness brings the lost back into My presence,

Her teachability makes her capable of mobilizing My restorative Force of Love on Earth.

May her Love bring healing and help to all people,
May her presence be the beginning of heaven on earth!

“Church is a blessed broken circle where God gets to take all of us, call us out of ourselves, knit us into something more and then give us away. Just keep giving us away.” —Stephanie Spellers

SESSION THREE

Watch Film

“Transformed Through Love Film Three”

Going Deeper

Where are you seeing signs of resurrection?

Life from death, broken made whole. Is your sight attuned to see it? Where do you find it in yourself? In your family? In your greater community? Where do you see it in our nation and in the world? What are steps to align yourself with it?

What gives you hope?

How do you face the hardships of life? What keeps you going when you feel weathered and worn?

How far does love go?

Is there an end to love? If not, how far are you willing to go?

Reflection

God can promote life anywhere we are, using love through us to widen the circle of inclusion, teaching us how to make room for the least of these, for the most challenging of these, for the despondent, depressed, abused. For felons and abusers, for addicts and prostitutes. For vagrants just outside the church walls—right on the other side of the door whacked out on heroin. For those of us sitting in the pews every Sunday overdosing on self-righteousness because we believe we are solid and have forgotten how we need God all together. That is good news.

We don't have to have an agenda. We don't have to have a plan. We can let go of our own hopes and expectations even...and let God show up in ways beyond our imagining. It may be that we show up thinking we are going to help and end up finding salvation for ourselves through a junkie loaded up on crack. Actually, that is exactly the kind of upside-down-thing that happens because Love goes all the way. God's Love won't free one and leave the other imprisoned. Alcoholics and addicts introduce us to our inner addict. Thieves help us to see how we shortchange or manipulate our world in subtle or big ways. With God, all parties involved in these sorts of relationships will have the opportunity of healing. This brings perspective

to those hardest to love because they have the potential to become our greatest teachers on HOW to love. It's incredible!

God is in and with and for all people and places, welcoming right alongside everyday hurts. God is wherever we stand, loving regardless. That is our missionary example, to stand as conduits of Love regardless of the situation or outcome. To be present, breathe, and extend the Love that promotes wholeness because according to the life, word and example of Jesus, thankfully, pain doesn't get the last word. God's Love, Life, and Beauty do, they go on and on without end. Thank God.

Further Contemplation

“Maybe what God wants is for us to pay attention to the invitation...to participate in what God is already doing...moving things in the direction toward love.” - Sara Shisler Off

“The most important thing we can do in sharing our faith is actually listening to how God is showing up in other people's lives.” - Stephanie Spellers

Individuals come to know God's hope for us through spending time in scripture, in nature, in silent prayer, in practicing deep listening. We also come to know what God wants by also doing all the aforementioned in community, Holy Communion. Let's practice deep listening. Here are a few suggestions to help you set up your time.

1. Schedule a dedicated 5-10 minutes of time. You will want it to be a time where you can be uninterrupted, and hopefully quiet.
2. Start by noticing the pattern of your breathing. If it is erratic, try to work towards a more natural, paced in and out flow.
3. Get comfortable, but not so comfortable you fall into sleep. It's okay if this happens, I fall asleep from time to time during meditation and am fine with it. But if you are practicing listening...then set yourself into a position to be able to be in active silence or reception mode.

“Show up and be open and ready and listen well enough and long enough to participate [in God's dream].” - Sara Shisler Goff

Go in Peace

Listen,
the voiceless are humming,
warming their chords, rehearsing—
they've tuned their lament
into songs of thanksgiving!
 “My God, my God.
 Take this life You gave me.
 Take all that is left of me.”

To make room for all,
I am letting some things die.

Look around,
evidence of My love is easy to find,
proof My wholeness process is in effect—
signs of resurrection are springing up
wildflowers outlining the path
a welcoming crowd waving
you onward
towards salvation,
towards Me.

Come out, come forward
Stand with Me on the path
and allow the blessings of Life to overtake you.