

When I was a kid, I had a friend whose family collected rocks. These kinds of rocks, some raw, some polished. Rocks and fossils that are special and rare, but not necessarily precious. Amateur geology, is the proper term.

My friend would have been able to tell you what kind of rocks these were, and where they came from, how they were made, everything. When I was in grade 1, I thought this was pretty cool. My friend even took me to a rock collector swap meet—I know, right?—where all the rockhounds got together to display their rocks and trade them.

I thought it was pretty cool for a while—rocks that were polished and smooth, and totally unique. Of course, I thought these were just common stones, as in, I could grab a handful of gravel from the driveway and polish it up to look like this. And so for my birthday, I asked for and received a rock tumbler.

Anyone familiar with this? Basically it's like a tiny washing machine. You put in some stones along with a mixture of grit, and turn it on. And it spins, slowly, and the friction slowly wears down the edges, and smooths out the rock. And then you repeat it with a different kind of grit, and eventually some polish goo, and then finally you get nice polished rocks.

Like I said, as a kid I didn't totally understand the process. I thought you'd put the rocks in, turn it on, and in an hour or two you'd have smooth shiny rocks. So I was pretty disappointed when I left my first batch of driveway gravel tumble around overnight, opened it up, and it still looked pretty much like a handful of driveway gravel.

Rock tumbling takes weeks. It's awfully boring to a kid. It takes a long time to transform a rock from this to this (rough to smooth and shiny).

We are kind of like these rocks (that you're holding).

Last Sunday, I talked about the purpose of worship being formation. As Paul says in Romans 12:

*I 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. Do 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.*

There are a lot of good things involved in worship: praise, rest and renewal, education, ritual, offering, relationship building, etc. But the underlying purpose of all of this is formation: worship shapes us. Worship transforms us from who we are into who we are meant to be.

Today I'm talking about what that looks like. And my first point is that formation is usually slow and repetitive. It takes time to wear the rough edges off of a rock, and it takes time to wear the rough edges off of a person.

I'm not saying that worship should be about as exciting as tumbling rocks. 😊 But sometimes repetition is the point.

I once heard of a preacher who was new to a congregation. And when he was interviewing for the position, he gave a sample sermon, and everybody loved it. And then when he was hired, he showed up the first week, and preached the exact same sermon—same illustration, same jokes, same hand gestures, everything. And people thought it was weird, but hey he just started, maybe he forgot that he'd already preached that one or maybe he didn't have time that first week to write something new.

But then his second Sunday, same sermon. And people started to grumble... what's this guy doing, etc. So on his third Sunday, when he started into the same sermon yet again, one guy (we'll call him Marv?) just couldn't take it. He stood up and yelled "Hey preacher, we've heard this one before, don't you have any other sermons?"

And the preacher replied, "I have lots of sermons. I'll give you a new one when you starting putting into practice what you're hearing in this one!" 😊

That's a little extreme, but you get the point. The repetition of worship is intentional. The traditions that we do again and again, the peace candle that we light every week, the familiar songs that we keep coming back to, the church calendar of Advent and Lent and especially the words and ritual of communion. It's all practice, it's all intentional repetition meant to shape us, to ingrain in us the patterns of God.

Formation takes time and repeated motion. It doesn't have to be boring, formation can be creative and fresh. But it often takes time and repetition. Worship is practice.

(If you hear a little voice in your head telling you that you should come to church more often, well, I'm not going to disagree!) ☺

The second thing about formation through worship is that it balances individuality with community. We are not created the same, and even in this process of smoothing out our rough edges, God is not trying to make each of us fit into the same mold. And yet, worship is something that we do together, at least in part.

When Keri and I travelled to South America a couple of years ago, one of the highlights was the structures built by the Incas in Peru. The amazing thing about Inca stonework is that they didn't use any mortar between the stones. Huge walls like these, built entirely of stones that fit together exactly. You couldn't fit a credit card or knife in there, and there's no movement, totally solid. Amazing craftsmanship. And not just small stones, big massive ones. It's still a mystery how they managed to shape the stones to fit so perfectly; it would have taken a huge amount of time and labor.

I think this is a good metaphor of corporate worship. We are individuals. Our shape is unique, and the work of formation is going to look different in each of us. The Inca builders allowed the rock to be what it was, they worked with the natural shape and strength of each rock. Formation wasn't about wholesale changes of the rock, it was about smoothing and shaping each rock and finding its perfect placement.

This is what we do in worship. We come as we are, and that basic shape doesn't have to change; but we are formed so that we fit together. Our individual shape serves the needs of the whole, in a way that is true to who we are.

Finally it is this relationship between individuals and community that is both an end goal of formation and a means by which we are formed. We are formed *for* love and we are formed *by* love.

We heard the first letter of John put it this way:

*1 John 2:4-6 - 4 The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. 5 But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: 6Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.*

Love is the end goal of formation: obedience to God is to have God's love living in and through us. To be "in God" is to walk in love as Jesus did. Love is the goal.

And Love is also how we get to that goal:

*7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

If it sounds like John is talking in circles, he is. Love comes from God and is lived out by us. It's in the loving that we know God's love. Love is both destination and path.

Let me explain. What is it that forms us? To keep going with the rock metaphor, what is it that smooths our edges and shapes us so we fit into place? If you just put a bunch of rocks into a rock tumbler, not much happens even if you let them tumble for months. If they're the same hardness, they'll just keep bumping into each other without creating any change. What you need is the grit, something hard and grainy like silicon carbide. That bit of dust becomes the agent of change that shapes the rocks.

In spiritual formation, what is the agent of change?

In our Western worldview that emphasizes education, knowledge is often held up as the key to formation. Information, it's right there in the word. Change happens through learning. And so "awareness" becomes a way to create social change—if we can just create awareness about prostate disease, that knowledge will lead to improvements in men's health. Better health through mustaches; welcome to November. ☺

At church we often buy into that as well. If the preacher can teach you the right bits of information or the right interpretation of Scripture, then you'll change. (If only it were that easy...)

Or in other places in society and church, the emphasis is on right belief. If we can elect a party with the right values, the country will be better. If we uphold the right theology, if we have enough faith, our beliefs will change us. And so we recite creeds, and have lengthy discernment around confessions of faith.

At other times, we emphasize duty, or service, or experience, or will as the path to change. All of those can be good things. But I don't think any of those things on their own are the "grit" that shapes us. As Paul writes,

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

Love is the greatest of these, because love is the agent of change.

This week I saw the movie *Fury* starring Brad Pitt. It's a story from World War II, a US army tank unit fighting in Germany near the end of the war.

These five guys have been through it all, the beaches of Normandy, brutal combat through France, and they've stayed together throughout. Until one of them is killed in combat in Germany. He's replaced by a fresh-faced recruit, a teenager who joined the army to be a typist but somehow got dragged to the front lines and thrown into this tank.

His job is to operate a machine gun from inside the tank, but he just can't pull the trigger. They're in the middle of a battle, Germans shooting at them from all sides, and he just can't bring himself to shoot and kill. That puts the rest of the guys in the tank at risk, so they're pretty upset that he won't do his job.

So they try to bully him into it, calling him a coward and questioning his manhood. They try reasoning with him, they remind him of his duty, why he signed up for the war in the first place. They question his beliefs, reminding him of the justice of the cause. They appeal to his personal safety—it's kill or be killed, after all. They even force him to kill a German soldier that they've captured, literally forcing his hand to hold the gun and pull the trigger.

But he still won't fight. He believes all the right things, his values and his knowledge and his duty and the influence of his peers all tell him that he should fight.

And then he meets a girl. I know, a little far-fetched to say that he falls in love in the middle of a war zone. But it's Hollywood. Anyway, he has this encounter with a young woman, however fleeting. And then she's destroyed by the Germans. (Sorry, spoilers).

However real or not real that love is, it's that brief experience of love that changes him. And after that, he's willing to fight and kill. And then he opens himself up to real relationships with the other guys in the tank, and then that love becomes a motivator for even more shooting and killing.

Of course it's Hollywood, and it's an exaggerated war movie. But it's not wrong—love brings change that knowledge and belief and duty cannot.

As John says, *If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

It is our love that shapes us. And so worship is an exercise in love, a place where we practice and build and experience love, in order that we might become more loving.

So when we come to worship, we certainly come expecting to learn something. We expect to be called to faith, remind of our trust in God that we orient our lives around. But most of all, we come with open hearts. We come ready to experience God's love being made complete in us, the love that comes from God and flows out to those around us.

That's what we're doing when we come together for worship. Of course, worship doesn't only happen "in here," it also happens "out there." So that's what the next two Sundays are going to focus on, what does it look like to worship God beyond the rituals and practices of Sunday morning.

But while we're still "in here," let's pray:

*Have mercy on us, O God, according to your steadfast love. Wash from us our guilt and shame, cleanse us from our selfishness. Before you we are humbled, your judgment—not ours—is just and true.*

*You desire truth in us, therefore teach us wisdom inside and out. Bring us a clean vision of ourselves and our world; let us hear joy and gladness, show us the goodness of discipline.*

*Hide your face from my sin. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Draw us into your presence, fill us with your Spirit. Restore to us the joy of your salvation; renew a right spirit within us.*

*Open our lips, o God, and our mouths will declare your praise. Do good in us, build in us your vision for the restoration of the world. Amen.*