

## Transfiguration

It has been quite a week.

Congress is considering a nearly \$2 trillion bail out to help people in need in the midst of an economic catastrophe that has hit the folks least able to manage it: service workers, particularly hotel and restaurant workers.

People who struggle to make ends meet in the best of times.

At the same time, the second impeachment trial of a single president, something never experienced before in our nation, is underway.

And of course the pandemic, entering its second year — and now claiming nearly 500,000 lives.

Almost as many people have died from this virus as from every war fought by this nation, combined.

And on top of all of this is our continuing cultural divide that seems to pit so many of us against each other.

So I was not surprised when one of our members looked at me last week, as he left the church, with pleading eyes, saying: “how do we heal this?”

And here we are, on the feast day of the Transfiguration of our Lord, and I have to wonder, was the transfiguration just a one time event?

Or, was the transfiguration more like an “apocalypse?”

In other words, "an unveiling?"

Do you wonder whether the transfiguration of Jesus is something unique?

Or does it reveal something shared by, accessible to, yet also hidden from, every human being?

You remember Thomas Merton's experience in Louisville, Kentucky, don't you?

There he stands one Fall day, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets, when he is suddenly seized by the realization that everyone he sees is part of himself, that we all, completely and totally, belong to one another.

He's so moved by this realization that he nearly laughs out loud!

He ends that wonderful epiphany by asking:

"What would people say if they knew that they are all walking around, shining like the sun?!"

So how do we get from the dull earth-toned effects of our current life, where we see enemies and illness and pain under every tree; to that vibrantly colored rainbow world of the Transfiguration?

How do we move from our current hell on earth, where everyone is starving because our 3 foot long chopsticks can't reach our own mouths, to the heaven of Transfiguration, where everyone also has those long chopsticks, but they are filled, because they feed one another?

Martin Luther King, Jr. struggled with these same questions as he faced radical segregationists in our nation in the 1950's and 60's.

"I have begun to realize how hard it is for a lot of people to go on living without having someone to really look down upon," he explained.

"It's not just that they'll feel cheated out of someone to hate, it's that they'll be compelled to look more closely at themselves.

At what they don't like in themselves.

My heart goes out to people I hear called 'rednecks.'

They have little, if anything.

And hate is a possession they can still call upon reliably, because it works for them.

I have less charity in my heart for well-to-do and well educated people — for their snide comments, cleverly rationalized views.

For the way they mobilize their political and even moral justifications to suit their own purposes.

No one calls them into account.

The Klan is their whipping boy.

Someday all of us will see that when we start going after a race or a religion, a type, a region, a section of the Lord's humanity — then we're cutting into Our Lord's heart, and we're bleeding badly ourselves." R. Cole, Simone Weil, *A Modern Pilgrimage*, modified.

Perhaps healing won't start until we come once again to a wisdom our ancestors knew, which we, too often, forget.

It's the wisdom that says our modern thinking explains everything in life, except how to get through an ordinary day.

It's a wisdom that says "we have systems here to explain everything — except how to live.

And we have categories for every person on earth.

But who can explain just one human being?" P. Yancy, *Soul Survivor*, 115.

Maybe the way toward healing begins by recapturing our sense of the "inherent dignity of human beings, the image of God that lives in all of us.

Black or white.

Educated or illiterate.

Rich or poor.

Healthy or sick.

The spark that makes mortals — immortal." Id. 116, modified.

With that truth finally grasped, perhaps we might find the willingness to change the structures of our society that are established for the sole purpose of keeping some on top, and most on the bottom.

Perhaps with that truth finally grasped, those on the bottom can surrender their futile daydreams of someday being on top, and work together, with the numbers and power they have, to make these necessary structural changes.

With that truth finally grasped, perhaps those on the top can come to a place of realizing that far too often, the ladder of success, once you reach the top, is almost always leaning against the wrong wall.

And as individuals, can we find a way out of our culture-bound notions of success, pride, and greed — toward a more honest assessment of our own foibles and failures?

Do we, who see ourselves as liberals — as we preach justice and peace and equality, also find ourselves having a hard time being kind and patient with this slow waitress or with that tired grocery clerk?

Can we cultivate in ourselves the grace of humility?

The gentle spirit that flows from gratitude?

As Dr King said to a group of college students who were growing frustrated with the long slog of non-violence to defeat racism:

“A big danger for us is the temptation to follow the people we are opposing.

They call us names, so we call them names.

Our names may not be ‘redneck’ or ‘cracker.’

They may be names that have a sociological or psychological veneer to them.

A gloss.

But they are names nonetheless.

'Ignorant' or 'brainwashed,' or 'duped' or 'hysterical' or 'poor-white' or 'consumed by hate.'

I know you will all give me plenty of evidence in support of these categories.

But I urge you to think of them as that — as categories.

And I remind you that in many people called segregationists, there are other things going on in their lives.

This person or that person, standing here or there — may also be other things.

Kind to neighbors and family.

Helpful and good-spirited at work." MLK, Jr., The Call to Service.

All of which is as true today as it was when he first spoke those words some 55 years ago.

Just the other day, the newspaper reported about a gal who hadn't said a word to her Trump supporting neighbor for 4 years.

Until last Wednesday.

When she said "thank you."

Because that neighbor had, without being asked, plowed her home out from the massive snow storm that struck.

Maybe if we begin to search for the face of God in every person we encounter, even, perhaps especially, in the face of those we are scandalized by, perhaps then some much needed healing can take root.

Here's what one fellow learned after a stint at a Catholic Worker house:

"One afternoon, after several of us had struggles with a 'wino,' a 'Bowery bum,' an angry, cursing, truculent man of fifty or so, with long gray hair, a full, scraggly beard, a huge scar on his right cheek, a mouth with virtually no teeth, and bloodshot eyes, one of which had a terrible tic, an elderly Dorothy Day says,

'For all we know, he might be God himself come here to test us.

So let us treat him as an honored guest.

And see in his face the most beautiful face we can imagine.'" R. Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, modified.

Is that where we'll find our path to healing?

Is that where we'll find our path to transfiguration as well?

+amen

