

## Transfiguration Again

Some years we hear the story of the transfiguration of Jesus right at the beginning of the season of Lent.

When the story is told then, it gets to us thinking about a spirituality of self-discipline and self-denial.

Call it “uphill spirituality.”

That’s because the story begins with Jesus and his friends trudging up the mountain before the miracle occurs.

Because the point of Lent is to think about those things in life that we can do without – and try to live without them – for a period of time.

But in other years, like this year, the transfiguration pops up amid the dog days of August.

Toward the end of our summer time away, when nothing in particular is going on.

It’s a time of the year we might think of as “downhill spirituality.”

A season of the year when we are kind of taking it easy, (except here in Hawaii, where our teachers and students seem to go back to school earlier every year!).

But what does it mean to confront the transfiguration in the midst of our ordinary, even mundane, day-to-day lives during these closing days of summer?

Perhaps what it means is that even in the midst of our most average days, we are being reminded, through the miracle of the transfiguration, **that God became human so that humans might become God.**

This startling, even mind-bending notion that God became human so that humans can become God is as ancient as our faith.

It continues to be nurtured and contemplated upon by our Orthodox siblings; and by mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Thomas Merton.

But sadly, for those of us in the western church, this central notion of who we are, and who we shall become, has too often been left to wither on the vine.

Too often, our western church has instead focused on the individual peccadilloes of its members.

Too often, our faith in the west has been reduced to following certain rules, being careful not to step over too many lines, all in the hopes of being awarded a halo and a harp when we breathe our last.

But authentic Christianity is light years deeper than this comic book image of who we are called to become.

And for that, it is good and proper that the mystery of the transfiguration should interrupt us in these early days of August, 2023.

It is good and proper not only for this, our congregation, but for the whole church around the world.

As you all know, there's been a great deal of consternation about the falling off of church membership.

For the first time in American history, more people identify as having no faith than those who ascribe to many of the major denominations.

Our bishop recently circulated an article written by a retired bishop who has spent several years working at various Episcopal seminaries around the country.

And that Bishop shares a number of insightful ideas about the kind of clergy education that may be necessary if we are to be a church for the future.

And yet, if our churches are only preparing us, clergy and lay people, to live contentedly within the current status quo, then our churches will undoubtedly continue the downward spiral.

Perhaps something different is required.

"The theologian Stanley Hauerwas captured the problem well when he said that 'pastoral care has become obsessed with the personal wounds of people in advanced industrial societies who have discovered that their lives lack meaning.'

The difficulty is that many of the wounds and aches provoked by our current order aren't of a sort that can be managed or life-hacked away.

They are resolved only by changing one's life, by becoming a radically different sort of person — belonging to a radically different sort of community." J. Meador, *The Atlantic*, July 28, 2023.

In short, it may be that our churches are not asking too much from their people, but rather asking too little.

It's the reason why we have all of these social ministries here at St Elizabeth's.

It's not because we are social workers or progressives or any other ideological brand of people.

We do these things because Christ commands us to do these things.

We are called to reach out to the least and the lost and the left behind because that reaching out is the clarion call of our faith.

As Christians, it is most profoundly the very purpose of our lives.

In doing so, we are in some small way reflecting God's willingness to leave everything behind — who, in Christ, joins us in our journey on this beautiful, yet broken, earth.

Self-surrender, caring for the other, trusting, no matter the odds, that all shall be well, this is the heartbeat of authentic Christianity.

And when we live into that heartbeat, we too are caught up in the mystery of the transfiguration.

Because we find ourselves changing.

Changing from people concerned with status or wealth or reputation, into people who begin to see other people as not only people, but as beloved children of God.

Perhaps this is why the most important words spoken in today's gospel lesson are the words that the apostles hear directly from God: "this is my Chosen Son, listen to him!"

And when we do listen to Jesus, the authentic Jesus, the gospel Jesus, what do we hear?

Luke, who recounts the experience of the transfiguration today, tells us what Jesus says:

"Do to others as you would have them do to you. \*\*\*

Love your enemies, do good to them. \*\*\*

Be merciful, as your Father is merciful.

Don't judge, and you won't be judged.

Don't condemn, and you won't be condemned.

Forgive, and you'll be forgiven.

Give, and it will be given to you. \*\*\*

For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you."

And there is this:

"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake — will save it."

How might we enter more deeply into this new kind of life?

Especially in these dog days of summer?

Especially in these trying times of late capitalism?

In some ways, we can begin at a most basic level.

“Turn off the television and read a good book.

Quit texting and ride your bike.

Close the computer and go to a movie.

Don't answer any emails.

Don't try to 'get ahead.'

Don't take any callbacks.

And during the family dinner, turn off the phone.

Reclaim your life, your thoughts, your personality, your friends, your family.” J. Chittester, Between the Dark and the Daylight: Embracing the Contradictions of Life

And then, using these simple steps to become a little less cluttered, to then become a little more insightful, by taking time to practice the deeper discipline of self-examination.

When we do that, we come to recognize that “we each carry a certain amount of pain from our very childhood.

If that pain isn't healed and transformed, it actually increases as we grow older, and we spread it to people around us.

We can become violent in our attitudes, gestures, words, and actions.

It's therefore healing and helpful to nip this process in the bud by acknowledging and owning our own pain, rather than projecting it onto others." R. Rohr, *Mary and Nonviolence*. Modified.

Strangely, acknowledging our pain, releases us from it.

I don't think I've said this before, but here's the thing:

Every sermon that I preach is born out of something I need to hear in my own spiritual development.

Every challenge, every invitation to soul-searching, it's all aimed at one person – me!

And if a few of you might relate on occasion, all the better.

Because truth be told, this life in Christ is long and difficult, as much as it is filled with joy and wonder.

So thank you for the opportunity to share this journey with you week after week.

It is the greatest gift and deepest joy of my life.

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