

“Being Transfigured”  
February 3, 2008

Matthew 17:1-9  
FCC Open and Affirming Statement

Twenty-five years ago, when Chey and I were living for several months in the mountains of northern New Mexico, we met another couple who actually lived in Oakland but were staying in that area for a while. We kept in touch when they returned to California, and then we became closer friends after Chey and I also came back to the East Bay so I could go back to law school.

When Chey and I moved to New Mexico after I graduated, we stayed in touch with this couple and got together with them when we’d come out here to visit friends and family. Then, several years after we’d met them, we were in the East Bay for another visit, and one of them told us they had split up. We were surprised and saddened to hear it. We asked what had happened, why they’d broken up, and I’ll never forget our friend’s answer. They had split up, she said, because they realized they weren’t the same people they would have been if they had stayed single.

I was dumbfounded. I remember thinking, “But isn’t that the point? Isn’t that the point of being married or joined in holy union – to enter into something that’s bigger than you are and that will indeed change you?” I’m sure there were many reasons this couple went their separate ways, but I also trust that our friend was telling us the truth when she explained why they had ended their relationship. They didn’t want to stay together because being together *changed* them.

I suspect that most of us, at one time or another, have misgivings about our closest relationships for the very same reason – because they change our lives and ourselves in ways we don’t control. Staying true to the commitments we’ve made to our spouses or partners can take us into surprising places and circumstances that require us to grow and learn and mature in ways we might not have signed up for if we’d known they were coming. Staying true to our commitments to family and friends can require us to deal with conflict we’d rather avoid or face challenges that stretch us far beyond our comfort zones and our familiar ways of being. Staying true to our covenant with one another, here in this church, can push us to open our minds and our hearts more fully than we ever anticipated.

And when these changes and challenges are clearly turning us into people we wouldn’t have been in the absence of those relationships, there’s nothing wrong with taking a step back to look at the people we’re changing into. There’s nothing wrong with looking at ourselves to see if the person we’re becoming is who we think we’re meant to be. If the answer is, “No,” then we have some thinking and praying and discerning to do about where our true path lies. But if the answer is, “Yes, I do think this is the person I’m meant to be,” or even if the answer is, “Well, maybe ...” we *still* have some thinking and praying and discerning to do, to be able to give ourselves fully to the path we’re on.

If we turn to this morning’s Gospel reading, the story of Jesus’ transfiguration, I think we’re encountering at least three people with misgivings about the path they’re on and about whether they’re still willing to embrace the changes and challenges that their relationship with Jesus is bringing. As the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell

the story, immediately before he takes James, John, and Peter to the mountain top, Jesus reminds his disciples just what sort of changes and challenges lie before them if they want to follow him. He tells them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it.” This as Jesus’ fair warning to his disciples, past and present, that following him means letting go of who we’ve been so that God can change us into the people we *can* be, people who more fully reflect the beauty, love, and glory of God.

Jesus’ teaching about crosses and losing one’s life would have been sobering enough, but then he takes James, John, and Peter up a high mountain, where Jesus is transfigured. His face shines like the sun, and his clothes dazzle. The disciples see Moses and Elijah, and then they hear a voice from a bright cloud, announcing, “This is my son, the Beloved.” This is, understandably, all a little too much for James, John, and Peter, who all fall to the ground in fear.

Traditional interpretations of the transfiguration argue that the presence of Moses and Elijah confirms that Jesus has come to fulfill the law and the prophets and that the voice from cloud establishes Jesus as God’s anointed, beloved son to whom the whole world should listen. I don’t want to argue with those interpretations, at least not this morning, because I think this story has something quite different to offer, something that has less to do with theological claims about Jesus and more to do with God’s claims on us.

Remember, before the mountain, Jesus has told his disciples that if they want to follow him, they must take up their crosses and be willing to lose their lives in order to save them. He has invited them to surrender to the God who called them into life and who calls them to offer their lives in loving service. Jesus has opened himself – he has surrendered his life – to the power, grace, compassion, and love of God, and he invites his disciples to do the same. And as the Gospels tell the story, the very next thing he does is take three of his disciples to a mountain top where the glory of God’s power, grace, compassion, and love transfigures him.

In this story, I hear God’s invitation to us to join Jesus in allowing *ourselves* to be transfigured by that same holy spirit of grace, compassion, and love. The story isn’t simply about who Jesus was or is or may be; it’s about who *we* can become and how *we* will be changed if we open ourselves to God as fully as Jesus did. It’s a story that tells us that the light of God can shine so brightly through us that we, too, will be transfigured.

This isn’t a pipe dream, folks. It isn’t some bit of wishful, pie in the sky fantasy I cooked up last year – or last night. It’s something that has already happened, here in this congregation, several years before I ever heard of the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, United Church of Christ. It happened in 2001, when this church unanimously adopted the Open and Affirming Statement that we reaffirmed several minutes ago.

Maybe those of you who were here at the time didn’t notice it at first. Maybe the world didn’t notice it at first either. But on November 11, 2001, this church let God transfigure it, so that the light of God began to pour forth through this place and this people, changing this church and the world. “As a diverse body of believers seeking to live in the light and image of God in Christ,” this church declared to itself and to the world that sexual orientation will not determine who is and isn’t welcome here, that it will not determine who is and isn’t allowed to be married here, and that it does not determine who is and isn’t beloved of God. “As a diverse body of believers seeking to

live in the light of God in Christ,” this church was transformed, *transfigured*, by the light of God in Christ.

I wasn’t here as this congregation walked the path that led it to embracing justice and welcoming people whom so many other churches reject and even despise. Because I wasn’t here, I don’t know just how hard and risky it seemed to climb to the mountain top where God transformed and transfigured this church, but I have no doubt that there were times when it was indeed a hard and risky journey.

I can’t describe this congregation’s experiences of coming to declare itself an Open and Affirming church, a welcoming sanctuary for those who have been disenfranchised from so many other religious communities. But I do want to describe some of the larger context in which we all lived and still live, because it’s in the larger context that we can all come to see the grace-filled transfiguration of this church. Then we can all see how brightly the light of God shone through this congregation on that day and how dazzling this congregation can still be.

Here’s just a bit of that larger context. Not long before FCC’s vote to become Open and Affirming, the Rev. Jerry Falwell had declared that the September 11 attacks were God’s punishment for America’s tolerance of gay men and lesbians, among other things. Within a year or so of this church’s becoming Open and Affirming, the man who is now pope declared that gay men and lesbians raising children was the moral equivalent of child abuse.

Then, three years after this church became Open and Affirming, a wave of referenda and state constitutional amendments swept the country, making sure that gay men and lesbians stayed second class citizens, and God was almost always cited as the reason for the discrimination. (In Massachusetts, one opponent of marriage equality made this point especially clear. He held a sign with the letters G-A-Y down the left hand side and, reading left to right, the sign said, “God Abhors You.”) And here, in Sonoma, in the two years I’ve been reading the *Index-Tribune*, other clergy in town have used their faith page column to equate lesbians and gay men with people who sexually abuse children or animals and to proclaim both that hell is real and that “unrepentant homosexuals” will reside there for eternity.

That was and is a bit of the larger context from which God led this congregation up the mountain, so that it could be transfigured by the light of God in Christ. In the gospel stories of Jesus’ transfiguration, only James, John, and Peter were witnesses. But here, this congregation’s transfiguration is meant for everyone to see. Through this church and an increasing number of others, God is shining like the sun and is speaking in a clear voice, “All people are my beloved sons and daughters. Listen to those among my people who speak this truth.”

So the good news this morning is that this congregation has followed Jesus up the mountain, where it was transfigured by the light and grace of a God whose love is boundless and whose blessing is meant for all. The *challenging* news this morning is that Jesus is still saying, “Pick up your cross, be willing to lose your life in order to gain it, and follow me.” The challenging news is that there are more mountains to climb and more transformations and transfigurations to come. The challenging news is that continuing on our journey with God holds, not the possibility, but the *promise* that we will be different people from the people we would be if we rejected the journey.

There may be times when you or I or we become like that couple Chey and I got to know so many years ago. We may start to think that the changes coming from our journey with God are just too much. But our relationship with God is different from our human relationships. Human relationships can lead us in the wrong direction and change us in ways that diminish and distort who we truly are. But our relationship with God leads in only one direction, the direction that leads us to our deepest, most loving self, the self that knows and shines with the dazzling light of God. It may not always be an easy relationship, but it is always a life-giving relationship.

For that and for so much more, thanks be to God.

Amen.

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