

Transfiguration Sunday

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Paul Eldred

February 26th, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

When was a time you were changed? Think about it – when in your life have you experienced something that transformed you? We can have many of these moments in life – falling in love, having a child, moving across the country, the death of a loved one. Whatever it may be, you can look at that moment and realize that you were not the same afterwards as you were before. Perhaps you’ve seen that transformation in others. Last year, I was blessed to see a small glimmer of transformation in a group of young people.

When I was serving my internship year at a church in Minnesota, I had the opportunity to chaperone a group of 15 high schoolers on a five-day backpacking trip in the mountains of Wyoming. While many may recoil at the idea of spending a week in the wilderness with a bunch of teenagers, it was easily one of the highlights of my year. Coming from Alaska and the Pacific Northwest, one of my spiritual homes is in the mountains and, well, the Midwest doesn’t exactly have an abundance of mountain ranges. So I jumped

at the opportunity to spend a few days hiking in the mountains with the youth of the congregation.

When the departure day came, we loaded up the vans and set out. After a daylong drive through the...thrilling landscapes of western Minnesota and the entire length of South Dakota we arrived in the Bighorn Mountains. For many of the students on the trip, this was the first time they had seen mountains up close, let alone hiked in them. Much of the first day on the trail was uphill. Still surrounded by trees, we trudged up some steep inclines and quite a few students grumbled on the way – realizing how heavy their packs really were or how much walking this would entail or how their hiking boots really should have been broken in beforehand. That night was a quiet one as hikers young and old alike crawled into their tents tired and sore.

The next morning, we woke up, broke camp, and hit the trail. And that meant we continued up the trail. The trudging continued. But not long after we started hiking that day, we got to this ridge – the highest point of the entire trip – and the valley we were entering opened up before us. Rolling green meadows bedazzled with wildflowers, crystal blue lakes mirroring the snowcapped peaks. The sight was simply gorgeous. This is what we were hiking toward. This was the valley where we were spending most of the trip; we just had a hard climb to get there. And while I was feeling happy and at home in the mountains, when I looked back at the high schoolers, I couldn't

help but grin. Their jaws were on the floor. They were experiencing God's creation in a way they never had before – seeing the glory of God showing forth in the beautiful valley spread out before them. I could tell that this was a transformative moment for these young people – a moment they would remember and radiate forth for the rest of their lives as they experienced God in a new and exciting way.

On this feast day, it's easy for the Church to focus on how Jesus changed in front of the disciples – I mean; it's called Transfiguration of Our Lord after all. But it seems to me that Jesus is not really transforming into something new, he's just finally showing the world who he really is – the part of him that he had been hiding. The real change seems to come in the disciples that witness the glory of God shining forth like the sun through Jesus' transfiguration. It's really Peter, James, and John who have the more transforming experience in today's gospel reading. And while seeing Jesus turn dazzling white and chat with Biblical All-Stars Moses and Elijah would likely be *pretty* life changing, I wonder if these three seasoned disciples were as changed by the experience they had on the mountain as they were by the simple commands they received on that mountain.

“This is my Son, the Beloved...listen to him.”

“Get up.”

“Do not be afraid.”

While I often sympathize with the disciples, the first command seems to me like it should be self-evident. These three were some of Jesus' earliest disciples and yet, the voice from heaven still has to remind them to listen to their teacher. I can still get where they're coming from though. There was likely a lot of conflicting alternate information floating around that would tell them truths contrary to what they were being taught. There were times their belief in Jesus as their messiah would be challenged. And yet, they are reminded that their teacher, Jesus, is the source of truth and life. This Jesus, who shines forth with the glory of God, has called them and guides them when outside influences seek to sow doubt. That Jesus and his teachings lead his disciples closer to what God intends for them and how God envisions the world – a world transformed by God's love and justice. So, even when the world around them seems crazy, the disciples should continue to listen to Jesus.

And part of listening to Jesus is to be transformed by his words. Jesus himself reaches down to the disciples, touches them, and tells them to "Get up." But more than just standing up, it's a call to be changed – because being a disciple of Jesus means that you should be transformed – living into new life in Christ. Transformed by his love and transformed to lives of showing forth that love to other people. Transformed to care for the people Jesus cared for – the outcasts, the rejected, the forgotten, and the marginalized. Jesus is reaching

down to his disciples to lift them up from states of awe and worship into lives of service for others and teaching about God's love for all people.

But Jesus also knows that this calling to be transformed is not easy – indeed that it is often a perilous journey to travel. As Jesus starts his own journey to Jerusalem from this mountaintop, he is fully aware that there are many that stand against a gospel message bringing good news of God's love for all people. But even so, he tells them to not be afraid, but let the light of God shine through you. He reminds them that they are not alone in their mission. That when they are scorned or rejected or persecuted for continuing God's work, Jesus will continue to be with them. Because, ultimately, this gospel, this light for all people, is meant for living out – something that cannot be done from the solitude of a mountaintop, but must be done in daily life, in communal living and action.

“Listen to him.” “Get up.” “Do not be afraid.”

These seem like good instructions for you and me too, beloved. As we live in a world that is rife with hatred and fear, a society surrounded with inequality and injustice, we can hold on to the words and the example of Jesus and his transformative reality in the world.

Today also serves as a point of transition in the church year. On Wednesday, we enter the season of Lent and Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem – where we remember how his transformative and radical gospel was

rejected by society. Where we see how the rejection even led to his death. But Lent also leads us to Easter when we will proclaim that even in the face of death, God transforms that reality into new life – and brings us into that new life with Christ.

We as Christians are a people of transformations – both in our life and in our world. In the waters of our baptism, our relationship with God was changed as God proclaimed, “This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Each week, we gather together to again listen to the Word of God that continues to speak to us and show us where Christ calls us to be agents of transformation in the world. We gather around this Table where we are transformed again and again into the Body of Christ. No, our faces may not shine like the sun this morning or our clothes turn dazzling white, but through the simple elements of bread and wine, Christ will work in us and through us and transfigure us more and more into his new creation. And just as Jesus went down from the mountain and made his way to Jerusalem, we too are called to go from this place after we are changed, to serve those around us – radiating Christ’s presence in the world that is in need of light and change. And we are reminded that we are not alone in our mission and should not fear, for Christ himself goes with us.

It may be hard to think of this little church as a mountaintop where God’s glory is revealed in dazzling light, but we can be assured that Christ is

here to teach us, to raise us up, and to be with us as we journey transforming each of our lives as we work to transform the world.

Thanks be to God!