

Transfiguration
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Vicar Sarah Derrick
March 3rd, 2019

TJ was the best. A first-grader, away from home for the first time at summer camp, TJ quickly became friends with not only his fellow cabin-mates, but with other counselors and campers who shared his week at camp. Counselors quickly learned that TJ could help fill a few minutes of down time, and a regular pre-lunch session of *Jokes with TJ* became a daily staple. TJ became something of a celebrity in his week at camp.

On Saturday, I was with my cabin as parents came and picked up their kids, and I saw two parents walk over to TJ's cabin and emerge with our beloved camper. He ran off to say goodbye to his friends, and I walked up to his parents and said, "Oh you must be TJ's parents. We LOVED having him here this week." His parents looked at me and said, "TJ? That's our son over there," pointing to the boy who I knew to be TJ. I said, "Yes, that's who I'm talking about, what is his name?" And they responded with, "Our son's name is Marcus...?"

It was clear from this encounter that much of what we at camp came to know about TJ would be a surprise to his parents, not least among those things being his newly claimed name.

Turns out, TJ had almost immediately introduced himself with this name early on in his cabin, and began to live into a new name in a new place. While this story of TJ continues to be one of the funnier memories I have of campers, this story isn't unique

to TJ. It is a story of a boy coming to find a place where he could be fully himself, celebrated for who he is, in community. It is a story of finding a safe place where God's love is felt closely as new friends laugh and build one another up when they are struggling. And, it is a story of wondering if things can be the same with the life that awaits you off the mountain when it is time to leave.

It isn't so surprising that TJ, along with so many others who have gone to a summer camp, ask the question, *can't we stay?*

Whether it is a summer camp experience or another experience of being deeply known and loved, I would imagine that at some point, we have all asked this question that TJ asked and that the disciples asked in today's gospel: *can't we stay?* It is good for us to be here, let's stay a little longer.

Because the truth is that what lies below, down the mountain is a terrifying thing to imagine sometimes. In this Transfiguration on the mountaintop, the disciples came to know more clearly what awaited them when they descended from the mountain with Jesus—

they'd be walking toward Jerusalem,

toward the suffering and death of their beloved teacher, leader, and friend.

They would be walking toward the uncertainty of what would come of their faithful community of disciples,

toward the uncertainty of how they would be received as followers of Jesus, of the one whom people were already turning against.

The fear didn't just reside off of the mountain though, but came over them as they began to see Jesus differently on the mountaintop, as the pieces of this story they

were living began to come together. This vision of Jesus, dazzling, talking with Moses and Elijah—the disciples looking on, this whole scene is engulfed by a cloud. And the disciples were terrified. (Luke 9:34) But just in that moment of fear, the disciples are overcome with a word from above, filling the cloud that surrounded. “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” (Luke 9:35)

Does this sound familiar? Does this sound like something we’ve heard before? Because this mountaintop experience, this moment of turning, of transformation points back to how Jesus’ ministry begins, at the waters of Jesus’ baptism when a voice proclaims, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:22) In the moment of Jesus’ baptism, God spoke to Jesus, proclaiming God’s naming, claiming, and favor. Yet on the mountaintop, God speaks to those who surround Jesus, from “You are my Son,” to “This is my Son.” The affirmation of Jesus’ identity as God’s very own is what gives not only Jesus, but also Peter and James and John the ability to walk down that mountain, toward the very things they feared.

Friends, it has been a difficult week. Our siblings in the United Methodist Church have made a decision to not allow people who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community to be ordained into ministry. And we know that when any *kind* of person is banned from serving in the church, we can begin to wonder if God’s love is banned from those people, too. And so, from this place here today, you who belong to this community have a word to hear from God, as well. *You are God’s own child, God’s beloved, with you God is well pleased.* Dear friends, God’s love doesn’t come to you with conditions. God loves you. Plain and simple, no ifs, ands, or buts. God needs you in this place, in this community, and in this world. God doesn’t need you in spite of who you are. God needs you in this world *because* of who you are.

God loves you. And this love changes us. Not into people we aren't, but into the beloved people God has made us to be—together. God's love has the power to transform us to be a people who can walk down the mountain together, shoulder-to-shoulder, toward the very places the good news of God's all-encompassing love is needed most.

We need the mountaintops, but we can't stay there. We must walk down the mountain. Like the disciples, we might not have the words to say right away, but we walk down the mountain nonetheless.

We walk, remembering the movement of God's love and favor that resonates in the waters of baptism.

We walk, trusting God's command in the cloud: listen to Jesus.

I hope that this place is something of a mountain for us. I hope that this is a place where we see Jesus differently. I hope that this is a place where we can practice giving and receiving God's unmerited grace, God's abundant love. I hope that we, like TJ, can begin to understand ourselves differently in relationship to God and God's people. I hope we can find that this is a place where we return to remember our baptism, to remember that transformation is holy.

I also hope that what we experience in this place can't help but spill into the lives we live outside of this place.

I hope that the assurance of God's love proclaimed in the waters of baptism transforms the way we encounter our neighbor; that the grace that is freely given at this table transforms our own practices of giving so that no one is hungry in body, mind, or spirit.

To that end, and in honor of our dear TJ, I'd like to teach you a song from camp that I think speaks to the power of this Transfiguration we celebrate today.

*Madly*¹

“And I'm in love with you, I'm so madly in love with you”

“Let what we do in here, fill the streets out there. Let us dance for you, let us dance for you.”

May it be so.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELq6liOTfmQ>