

“Transformed”

Matthew 17: 1-9

This Sunday is the end of the Epiphany Season. Over the last few weeks we have been spending time with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. We have heard Jesus preach about being the salt of the earth, being the light of the world. We have heard him preach about loving our enemies, turning acts of hate into acts of good. Over the last few weeks, we have experienced Jesus on the mountain top, preaching, telling us how to live out our faith as his followers. So is it any surprise that we find ourselves on another mountaintop today with Jesus, this time, experiencing something even more life changing, something even more energizing. We are experiencing what it means to be transformed as people of faith.

In our text, we hear that Jesus’ appearance is transformed from the inside out, the light pouring from his face. His clothes are now dazzlingly white. We are told that like at the moment of his baptism a voice calls out to Jesus. This time, the voice interrupts the disciples’ comments, this time the voice interrupts the disciples’ attempts to stay in that place. At this moment of transfiguration, at this moment of transformation, a voice calls out, this time telling the disciples, this time telling us as readers “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!”

All in all, the transfiguration is a mysterious, glorious awe-inspiring event...and, as people of faith, we aren't exactly sure what to do with this story. We struggle to process it because our language and the very images we use to explain our faith fail us. They cannot grasp the immensity and the power of this particular moment in Jesus' ministry. The very foundations of our faith cannot grasp the mystery that surrounds this particular event. And so we are left wondering what do we do with this powerful life-changing story, not sure of how to move forward with it and certainly not sure what it means for us as people of faith.

I will say that, unfortunately, for us as Disciples of Christ, we usually tend to avoid the story of the Transfiguration. Our Disciple brains which rely on logic and reason to explain our faith, cannot explain it and what exactly happens up there on that mountaintop so we tend to skip over it when it shows up the liturgical year. For many Disciples Churches, we usually create an alternative text for this particular Sunday. We either pick up the storyline that follows the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew or we pick a congregational favorite and preach from that text. But this year, the lectionary forces our hand. There is nowhere to hide from the Transfiguration. This is our last stop before Lent. We cannot avoid it if we want to continue our journey of faith. So, today, as big D Disciples and as little d disciples of Christ, I invite us to open our hearts, to open our minds to the

power and glory of this particular moment, allowing it to begin transforming us into the people God created and calls us to be.

I need to stop right here and say that I am fully aware that the new “catchphrase” in churches these days is “Transformation.” We invite churches to begin a process of transformation. We invite people to be transformed but we as the leadership of the church never really answer the question, “Transformed into what?”

Even for this church, when we did the Surfing the Edge process a few years ago, a process that helped us have some difficult conversations that we had been putting off for way too long, a process that invited us to vision out our future, even that process still didn’t answer all our questions. Because two of the main concerns lifted up by the congregation to the leadership while we were in that process was “What are we transforming into? and How will we know when we get there?” The Surfing the Edge process happened about five years ago and I’ll be honest, I’m not sure, and my guess is that the leadership of this church is not sure any of us are any closer to having those two questions answered.

Because, you see transformation is not a one size fits all process. It is different for each individual. It is different for each organization. There is no formula to follow which will instantaneously transform us, leaving us with all the

answers to our faith questions or even letting us think we have finished our journeys of faith.

However, as I have lived with this text this past week, I have come the realization that if we as people of faith are ever going to be able to understand the concept of “transformation”, the place we need to start the conversation is by taking our cues from Jesus and this mountaintop experience.

Let me explain: You see, Matthew has told us everything we need to know to help us understand the process of “transformation”. First and foremost, Matthew tells us that Jesus is not changing just for the sake of change. That’s usually our first mistake as people of faith. We look around and say we need to change something about our churches, change something about ourselves just to show we are new and fresh, just to keep up the appearance of leading others to believe that we are good and faithful people. As people of faith, as churches, we usually change for the sake of changing without ever really knowing why we are changing in the first place. And then surprise, surprise, everyone gets frustrated, blaming the tension which results from the changes, saying things like “No one likes change.” That’s why our efforts at authentic transformation fail in the first place. We change for the sake of changing and then turn around and say, “No one likes change, so let’s not change”. And we wonder why churches are dying. And we wonder why people aren’t growing in faith.

Okay, so let's be honest. It's not that we don't like change.. As humans, we actually adapt pretty well to change. We wouldn't be here as a species if we didn't adapt to change. What we really don't like are stupid changes, changes that have no rhyme or reason, changes just of the sake of changing, changes that disrupt rather than help us grow, changes that tears things apart rather than bring us together in and as a community, changes like building a wall, changes like taking away health care, changes like creating a voucher system for education. These changes don't really change anything. All they did is rip communities apart and increase the division.

So let's be clear for a moment: Transformation is not changing our churches, changing ourselves as people of faith just for the sake of changing.

Which brings us back to our text, in looking at Jesus' transformation, we realize that transformation is embracing our identity as beloved children of God. Transformation is about letting this identity set our course as followers of Jesus Christ. Transformation is about changing from the inside out, becoming who God created and calls us to be...people of love, people of grace, people who are firmly grounded in the vision of the Kingdom of God becoming a reality here on earth.

If we look at our text, we see that is exactly what happens for Jesus. At his baptism, a voice from heaven confirms that Jesus is God's one Son in whom God

is well pleased. This changes him. And as part of Jesus' transformation process, this identity of God's Beloved has taken root and it now sets the course for the rest of his ministry, just like it did for us when we embraced our call to be followers of Jesus Christ.

Matthew is telling us Jesus is changed from the inside out. No longer is he just Mary and Joseph's boy, preaching in his hometown church, no longer is he a prophet calling his disciples to bring justice to the world. He has been set apart. He has been transformed into the person God created and calls him to be. He is now God's only Beloved Son, really to make his way to Jerusalem and usher in the Kingdom of God. He has become the person God created and called him to be.

Or let me say it another way. This is the part where I ask you why you are here. There are a million other things you could be doing on a Sunday morning. But you made the choice to be here, to be a part of this community of faith, growing in your faith, experiencing the Divine, letting the words of love and grace take root in your heart, letting them change how you view and experience the world.

We make this choice because at some point or another, someone told us that we were beloved children of God. Maybe it was at our baptism. Maybe it was at the Table where we were welcomed. Maybe it was simply someone sitting beside

us in an hour of great sorrow. But somehow, these words, these words claiming us and naming us as a Beloved Child of God were spoken to by a follower of Jesus Christ. When that person said those words to us, that person looked inside of us and saw the image of God residing there. Somehow, that person saw the light of Christ burning in our hearts like a living flame, and said the words that changed our lives forever. With those few loving, grace filled words, we were transformed. And we cannot go back to who we were before that moment. Nor do we want to go back to before that moment. Those words of grace, those words of love changed us from the inside out, and now suddenly, the light of Christ is pouring out of us. We have been transformed, transformed into the person God created us and calls us to be. We have become people firmly rooted in the Kingdom of God, working for justice, bringing healing and wholeness to all of God's creation.

Now, I'll be honest, I don't know how and what that process looks like for you. I only know how and what it looks like for me. Because remember, transformation is not a one size fits all thing. It is a process in which we embrace our God-given gifts, embrace our God given talents, sharing them with the rest of the world. Through the process of transformation, we become the person whom God first saw and said to the heavens, This is my Son, This is my daughter, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.

What Matthew wants us to understand and begin realizing is that transformation is filled with mystery and holy moments. It is full of confusion and fear. Transformation is mystical experience that connects us with the Divine while we are experiencing the real authentic touch of Jesus. It is a way for us as people of faith to become the light of Christ for all of God's creation.

All in all, this concept of transformation captures the very essence of our journeys of faith. It captures the ups and downs. It surprises us with moments of thinking we have got this whole faith thing all figured out only to realize that we have got nothing figured out.

This mountaintop text tells us that as people of faith, transformation is a process, not a destination. That's the beauty of this text. It gives us permission to continue the journey, letting us know that we aren't supposed to understand everything at this moment. In fact, Jesus even told his disciples that what they had just experienced would not make sense until AFTER the resurrection. He was telling them that this mountain experience was just the beginning of becoming the person God created them to be.

Jesus wants the disciples to know, Jesus wants us to know that all these things that we know about him so far, that Jesus is the Son of God, that he has come to bring a reversal of values, that he has come to usher in a new reign of

peace and reconciliation, all these things have value only if we let them, have value only if we embrace them with open hearts and minds. Because you see, the things we know about Jesus and the things he has taught us to do as his followers only matter if we allow them to shape us, allow them to transform us into the people God created us and calls us to be. “At its core, the story of the Transfiguration reminds us that change is never easy,” growing in our faith is never easy, becoming a follower of Jesus is never easy but...but it is what the world needs us to do. It is what the world needs us to become so that the Kingdom of God can and will come to fruition here on Earth for all of God’s creation.

Yes, it may be difficult and yes transformation may push us out of our comfort zones, having us interact with people this world has “othered”. But...But it is how we become the people God created and calls us to be.

Or let me say it this way... Too many times this week, I have heard that a lot of people’s main frustration with the Church and the people who go to church is that we tend to treat faith as a Sunday only thing. Meaning we arrive on Sunday morning, ready to confess our short-comings. We get a little bit of Jesus and leave all shiny and new, only to arrive on Monday, looking at each other, looking at God’s creation from the world’s standpoint, a standpoint of power and might, a standpoint of divisions and hurt, a standpoint that prefers fear over light and love.

Once again, I am not claiming to have all it all figured out but I can't help but wonder if we as people of faith, actually took our cues from Jesus, realizing that faith isn't something we pick up when we need it. It is not something we try on if and when we decide that it will help us keep up appearances with others.

But rather, we began the conversation of faith by allowing it to transform us from the inside, knowing that it is a process of becoming our true identity, our identity as a beloved child of God, an identity that continues to set the course for our ministry and the rest of our journeys.

How we live this out is up to us. No one is going to do it for us. Yes, some of the things Jesus calls us to do are difficult. And yes, no one is denying that it would be easier if we only were allowed to stay confined to our own reality of truth. But then think about what we would be missing... We would be missing out on becoming the person God created us and calls us to be. And no one wants to miss out on that.

May we always have the strength and the courage to engage in the process of transformation, changing from the inside out so that we become the people of love, becoming the people of grace this world needs us to be. Amen.

