

Transfiguration

By: Penny Holste

February 7, 2016. Pastor Penny talks about Luke 9:28-43a, in which Jesus takes Peter, John, and James up to a mountain to pray and is transfigured, and suggests that rather than remaining mired in a tyranny of selfishness, we can disregard our temptations and allow ourselves to get swept up into caring for others.

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We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I think we might understand the gospel a little more this morning, a little in a deeper way, if we imagine for a moment what Peter for instance might have been thinking about after these two days of events that we heard about:

These last two days were some of the best and worst of my life. They started so well. Jesus invited me, and James and John, to go up to the mountain while he was praying. And so we followed him up the mountain. And he sat down under a tree and closed his eyes and began praying. And we sat down under another tree and closed our eyes and started to feel sleepy. But something jolted me awake. All of a sudden my eyes were drawn to Jesus, and it was as if light was coming out of the pores of his face. He just glowed. And his clothes glowed. And not only that, but sitting next to him were two people from ancient days. And I don't know how I recognized them, but I knew it was Moses and Elijah. And there they were, talking to him about what he would do in Jerusalem.

It wasn't just that everything glowed. It was that it was a feeling. I was filled with a sense of peace, a sense of joy and anticipation, and I didn't want to lose that moment. So I blundered something and blabbered about, "Well, let me build some shelter for the three of you." And I hadn't even finished my offer when suddenly everything went dark. There was a cloud covering all of us. And I heard a voice -- and it could only have been the voice of God. It was more gentle than I thought it would be, but it was very firm. It said, "This is my son, the Chosen One; listen to him!" Listen to him. Those words kept echoing and suddenly the cloud was gone. The glow was gone. The feeling was gone. The light was gone. And it was just Jesus and the three of us.

But you can imagine that the next day, as we came down from that mountain, I was thinking through that experience again and again. What did God mean, "Listen to him?" What an amazing time that had been. But we got down to the foot of the mountain and everything changed. There was this big crowd of people, and a young man threw himself on the ground, screaming and foaming at the mouth. And his father rushed up to Jesus and fell down on his knees and begged Jesus to take the demon out of his son. And he said I asked, I begged your disciples to do it, but they couldn't. And then the worst thing happened. Jesus got angry. He looked at all of us and he said, "You faithless and perverse generation. How much longer must I live here and remain with you?" And then he healed the young man. You can see why it was the best and the worst of days for me, from the heights to the depths. And I was left with two questions. First of all, what was I supposed to listen to? And secondly, why did Jesus get so angry?

Well, I think both of those questions -- if Peter would have had them, and if we do happen to have them after hearing the gospel -- both of them can be partly answered by the words that come before the story of the Transfiguration. We heard some of those words in the gospel. Before this all happened, Jesus

made his first prediction: that he would die. And he would say that to the disciples two more times. And every time, they did not want to hear it. They did not hear it. They blocked it out or they couldn't hear it, we don't know. But they could not understand. And he followed up this first prediction with these difficult words to hear for all of us. He said: if you want to follow me, you have to pick up your cross and deny yourself. If you want to find your life, you have to lose it. Well no wonder God had to say, "Listen." These are not words any of us want to hear. And that's why Jesus was so angry: because people didn't understand. Even the disciples were going to be fighting over who was the greatest in just a few moments after this Transfiguration account. Deny yourselves? We don't want to hear those words. That is not the way we like to operate. We might deny other people of things they need in order to get what we need, but we're not inclined to deny ourselves.

We certainly see that with the political campaigns. Everyone wants the candidate who will give them what they want, and not really thinking about the country. And they often demonize people who don't agree with them. We see that in the way we protect our belongings, our possessions. "Not in my backyard," right? There might be a great program suggested for the city or for the state or the country. But if it affects my savings, if it diminishes my property value? Not in my backyard. We don't want to hear those words, and they are very hard for us to understand. And yet that is exactly why Jesus came: to free us from this tyranny of our selfishness. He denied himself. He gave up his life. He was raised from the dead so that he would not only show us how to be different, but empower us to be different.

There is another way to translate the word "deny." There's another word that we can use, and that word is "disregard." And maybe that helps us to understand a little more what Jesus is saying here. Because I think we know how to disregard ourselves at times. You might be involved in a game and you're so into it that you don't realize you haven't eaten for hours. If you are only hungry when you've finished with the game, you've been able to disregard your appetite all that time because you got swept up in something bigger. Or maybe you feel aches and pains as you walk into the movie theater, or as you plop down in front of the TV, but once you get involved in that story you forget, you disregard your aches and pains. Or maybe there's a new adventure that you're starting on and you're a little scared about it. But in the excitement of it, you begin to forget your fear. We know how to disregard our feelings, our fears, our hunger, our pain when we get swept up into something bigger than us. And that is exactly what Jesus is telling us here. He's not saying deny yourself of everything. He is saying: let me help you get swept up in caring for others, to the point where you disregard your pain or your time or your feelings or your money.

Sometimes we see people do this with broad strokes. We had a speaker here from the Concordance Academy of couple months ago. Maybe you read about Danny Ludeman. He was an executive for Wells Fargo, and he has just founded a ten million dollar agency to help ex-offenders return to society and have good lives and not return to crime. This came out of something with Lutheran roots called Project COPE. And when I listened to this interview with Danny, the interviewer said, "How did you get involved in this cause, to put your time and your money into this? Did you have relatives who spent some time in prison? Or why did you care about this cause?" And he said it started with a letter that the person from Project COPE wrote me, and I started looking at the statistics and I was amazed at the size of this problem. But he said that's not really why I got involved. I got involved because I started talking to the population, talking to ex-offenders, talking to their mothers and fathers and their children. And he said, I was overwhelmed with how many barriers society throws in front of these people that prevent them from leading good lives again. He said, I just had this compassion for this group of people and I had to do something.

We don't have to start a million dollar organization to be swept up with compassion or get involved in

the needs of others. I know so many of you are already involved. And we get involved in small ways daily. Maybe we disregard our fatigue at the end of a day when a friend calls with a problem, and we're on the phone for a couple hours. And we do it because we're involved in that life. We disregard ourselves. Or maybe you might resist the temptation to take the last two loaves of your favorite bread from the bakery shelf. And you might think well, maybe somebody else likes it as much as I do, and you leave that last loaf. Or maybe you drive past the parking place that is closest to the store, thinking someone else needs it more.

Follow me, Jesus says, let me get you swept up into the needs of others, the concerns of others, so that you lose yourself. You lose your life, but you find a rich, rewarding, fulfilling life full of joy doing my work. So we have to imagine, what is it? Who is it that have needs that our compassion can ease? What are those causes out there that God is putting in front of us, that we might throw ourselves into, get swept up in? Well clearly, this goes against our human nature and we can't do this on our own. So Jesus has given us gifts. He has given us his word. He's given us his holy meal. He's given us baptism. He's given us his spirit and he's given us each other. And that is what we find when we come on Sunday morning. We find his word, his holy meal, his spirit, and one another.

I read about a young couple who, when they couldn't both go to church because maybe one of their children was sick, they would each take a mental audit of the week that had gone before for them, and the week ahead, to decide who needed to go to church more. And they said it very simply. They said this: They said for us, worship is what makes sense of our lives. It is that pickup that we need. It's that connection with God that allows us to go out into our world the next week. Follow me, Jesus says. And it's not easy and we will never do it perfectly, not this side of heaven. This earth will not be perfect until Jesus returns. But as we follow, we do it having the joy of knowing that we are living for others and living for the Savior who loves us enough to die for us. And that is true living.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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