

If anyone was paying close attention to the events calendar you received from the church in the mail recently, you saw that it noted that today is Transfiguration Sunday. I was wrong about that when creating the calendar. According to the liturgical calendar—the fancy term given the calendar of the church year that begins with the first Sunday of Advent and ends with Christ the King Sunday, often the last Sunday in November—today, February 3rd, is the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany and Transfiguration Sunday, March 3rd, is exactly one month from today.

That's something interesting about February and March, the days of the weeks are numbered the same this month and next. It can get a little confusing as witnessed by my calendar snafu—but for our purposes today, it works. I like being able to say that Transfiguration Sunday is exactly one month from today. It builds up a sense of anticipation for a day that most people don't even know about, much less celebrate. It's sort of like when stores build up anticipation by advertising how many shopping days are left until Christmas—except that's a great thing about Transfiguration Sunday—no one is expecting any gifts—it hasn't been pre-empted by the commercialism of our culture.

And just to refresh our memories, before we go any further with this Transfiguration Sunday business, here's the story of the Transfiguration as it appears in Matthew's Gospel. *Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. ⁴ Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"* (Mt. 17)

I think Transfiguration Sunday is worth some type of hype, a holiday to anticipate, a special occasion that doesn't get its due, a day on which, I don't know, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to, let's say, give someone a pair of new shoes . . . That being said, I confess that, for the first eighteen Transfiguration Sundays of my career—which would be every one of them up until this point—I have struggled to find the meaning in Transfiguration Sunday. Some years I skipped it all together knowing that few people would miss it. But this year feels different . . . perhaps it just took some maturing on my part to understand that—at least within the context of the modern world in which we are living and the fear-mongering and division some folks are foaming at the mouth to inflict upon us—well, I think we're really missing out if we miss out on the meaning of transfiguration.

That being said, a struggle I've had with Transfiguration Sunday was that it didn't resonate with my daily life. It's a great story. But, who of us is going to hike up a hill with Jesus and see Moses

and Elijah (who had been dead for centuries) there, too. Who of us has had the experience of seeing dingy, dirty clothing caked with the sweat and dust of Middle Eastern desert walking paths turn a blinding and pure white right before our own eyes much less seeing people long-dead come back to life.

And yet, getting caught up in the extraordinary details of this story, which is what I've been doing for the last eighteen years, is getting lost in the weeds. If we look at it from a different vantage point and focus on this word "transfiguration", instead of the details of the story of The Transfiguration, its relevance to our daily lives becomes compelling—something worthy of a month of reflecting upon as we prepare for the actual Transfiguration Sunday on March 3.

The root of the word transfiguration, transfigure, means "a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state." Now that there is an idea that has some traction. Jesus was God's chosen one, "this is my Son," sent to change the world—empowered to instigate a transfiguration of the world into a more beautiful and spiritual state. Jesus was a redeemer with the power to take that which is dingy, dirty, caked with sweat and dust—indeed, a redeemer with the power to take that which was dead—and make it into something beautiful and radiant.

And so it is that, as those who got out of bed on this gray, rainy, slurpy morning because we wish to follow in the ways of Jesus, we, too, as the church—the hands and feet of Christ in the world today—are called to be agents of transfiguration. Transfiguration matters. Indeed, one of the purposes of the church is to transfigure—to make more beautiful and spiritual—this world in which we live.

This has been the reality for the church since the beginning of the church. The Apostle Paul, the most prolific missionary the church has ever known, authored the "how-to" manuals on creating, building up, and maintaining the Church of Jesus of Christ in this world. He founded churches and then, after he had moved on to start another church, he wrote letters to the churches to support, guide, correct, and inspire them. Paul's letters are the portion of the Bible that we call the epistles—the letters—located in the New Testament.

One of these letters was written to the church in Galatia, Scott read a portion of it for us this morning. Paul wrote the letter to guide the Galatians through a crisis they were facing from forces threatening to create false divisions in the church—divisions that would distract them and keep them from the work of transfiguration to which they had been called. The divisions came from those who said that new Christians had to first become Jews before they could become Christians. False leaders tried to create insiders and outsiders in the church, they fostered a sense of us and them and encouraged fear of "the other." Paul was furious with those attempting to divide the church in Galatia. For Paul, preserving the unity of the members of the church was of utmost importance. He explained that the things that used to divide people were no longer relevant for those who followed Christ because Christ had transfigured

the world into a more beautiful place where all people could be one. And Paul wrote to the Galatians saying . . .

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Unfortunately, the church in particular and society in general continues to struggle with divisions among the children of God, divisions created by those who delight in the power they gain when people are distracted by insignificant differences and false binaries. It remains an issue of such importance today that there was even an article about it in a recent Time magazine.

Jesus is remembered once to have said, “Who made me a divider? I’m not a divider, am I?” That line, found in the Gospel of Thomas, may strike an ironic note today: nothing, it seems, divides us more than Jesus — believer from non-believer; evangelical from liberal; Christian from Jew or Muslim. Religion divides us along ethnic lines and by class, and it imposes distinctions in male and female gender roles not tolerated anywhere else in society.

So it may seem a stretch to think that the very first Christian creed aimed not to divide, but to create ties of solidarity precisely across ethnic, class and gender lines. In fact, the early Christians made solidarity the very focus of the new communities they created . . .

The first Christian creed said nothing about the nature of God or Jesus Christ or salvation. It spoke of “the children of God,” and urged a spirit of “oneness” that could unite Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. Many today will find that idea incredible. But scholars of the New Testament have known of this early creed embedded in one of Paul’s letters for more than a century. You can find it today still there in Galatians 3:26-28. Unearthing it from this context and restoring its original lines requires some exegetical spadework, and scholars will quibble on its precise wording, but none doubt its existence or its age.

When the first followers of Jesus were baptized, this (more or less) is what they heard: *You are all children of God; There is no Jew or Greek; There is no slave or free; There is no male and female; For you are all one.* . . .

Race, class and gender have been used by every people in every time and place to draw a line between *us* and *them*, to the advantage of us, of course. But these early

Jesus followers decided to assume a different posture: (for our purposes this morning we could say that they felt compelled to transfigure their society) [for them] there would be no us, no them. Ethnicity, class, gender — these things would no longer count for anything. They simply would not exist.

“For you are all one,” they said. Not “you are all the same.” Sameness wasn’t the point. The point was “oneness” — *solidarity* that transcended race, class or gender.¹

Talk about a belief that would transfigure—a belief that would make the world more beautiful and spiritual—not just for the people for ancient Galatia but for us and this world in which we are living, as well. We live in a world that is DESPERATE for transfiguration, a world that desperately needs to be made more beautiful and spiritual.

You know, I’m glad I messed up with this calendar thing. It’s going to give us a month to reflect upon, pray about, and identify ways we as a church, and as individuals, have experienced transfiguration and how can be agents of transfiguration in the world. Next week we’ll consider the transfiguring power of listening. But for this week, you are invited to keep an eye out for examples of people who are transfiguring the world . . . those who are making your life and the lives of others more beautiful and spiritual. If you want to jot them down and sent them along to me, I’ll incorporate them into next week’s service. I think we’d all appreciate hearing the good news you have to share about witnessing God’s transfiguring work in the world today.

Thanks be to God for ongoing promise and hope of things becoming more beautiful and spiritual, thanks be to God for the gift of transfiguration. Thanks be to God, indeed.

Loving and Merciful God,

Thank you for sending Jesus to transfigure the world. Thank you for continuing to transfigure our lives by forgiving us, renewing us, and inspiring us. Help us to be agents of transfiguration—people who make our families, our marriages, our church, or communities, and even our world more beautiful and spiritual.

We are grateful for those you have sent and are sending into our lives to transfigure us. Make us wise to pay attention to them and honor their ministry among us. We pause in silence to call those people to our own minds’ eyes as we give thanks for them.

¹<http://time.com/5410308/early-christian-solidarity>

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

And we pray, also, O God, for those who are in desperate need of transfiguration—those for whom grief, fear, confusion, loss, shame, or helplessness make a more beautiful and spiritual world seem but a distant dream.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

All of our prayers we lift to you, O God, in the name of Jesus Christ, our redeemer who came to transfigure our hearts and your world, the one who teaches us to pray in your name . . . Amen.