

Transfigured—to be made more beautiful or spiritual. Transfiguration has been the theme of our worship experiences for the past month. If you recall, the whole thing happened because I erroneously listed Transfiguration Sunday on February 3 of the calendar mailed to your homes from the church, instead of listing it for today, March 3, the actual Transfiguration Sunday for realsies this time. It was, in the words of PBS painter Bob Ross, “not a mistake but a happy accident” that gave us opportunities during the month of February to consider ways we are transfigured—ways we are made more beautiful or spiritual—on our faith journeys.

We considered the ways we are transfigured when we are still and take time to pray in ways that allow us to hear the still, small voice of God. We contemplated the means by which we can be transfigured even as, or sometimes even perhaps because, we suffer. Last week we talked about the ways actively pursuing opportunities to encounter God in worship, scripture, prayer, and service can be transfiguring. And now, today, we return again to the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus that Susan just read for us.

As I said a month ago, it’s a strange story, one that can be hard to relate to because it seems far removed from our own experiences—clothes turning dazzling white without going through a wash cycle with Clorox, people appearing to be alive centuries after their deaths, a voice speaking clearly from a cloud. It must have been an awesome sight to behold. And while we can’t see what the disciples saw on the mountaintop that day, and while those experiences may seem far removed from our own daily lives, the most significant words of the passage are as true now as they were then. And God said, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”

And yet, at this point in the story of the Transfiguration, Jesus hasn’t been quoted as saying anything. While it certainly can, and should, be argued that God wants us to listen to everything Jesus has to say, it’s helpful to look at the most recent public proclamation Jesus had made previous to the Transfiguration if we are to truly appreciate God’s pronouncement that we are to listen to him as part of the Transfiguration story.

And so it was that scripture tells us that eight days before Jesus climbed the mountain with his disciples and was transfigured, he said to them . . . “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?” That is surely the primary message meant to be listened to and obeyed here [in the story of the Transfiguration].<sup>1</sup>

Jesus makes a clear distinction in this statement between choosing a life spent pursuing the trappings of worldly success and security or choosing a life spent pursuing true discipleship. When Jesus says, “whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” he is letting his disciples know that when they choose to follow him, they are making a potentially dangerous choice, a choice that will put them at odds with the powers and principalities of this world. We often use the term “oh, it’s my cross to bear” euphemistically. When Jesus said it, he meant it literally. He knows that his time to bear a cross is coming soon and he’s letting the disciples know that, if they choose to continue to follow him, it’s what is likely to happen to them as well.

When we think of a cross, most of us probably think of Jesus dying on one. But, when Jesus talks with the disciples about taking up their crosses in this passage—they do not yet equate it with him because they had not yet seen him die on a cross. But, they were well aware that a cross was a symbol of suffering and death.

Indeed, “In the days of the apostles, thousands of Jews died on crosses along with anyone else that Rome did not like. All over the Empire, political dissidents, terrorists, and people that resisted Rome’s authority found themselves nailed to execution stakes. Roadside Roman crosses were a common sight outside population centers, a gruesome reminder of Rome’s authority and terror. Those condemned to crucifixion had to carry the

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1572](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1572)

crossbeam (the horizontal part) over their shoulders out to the stake (the stakes stayed in place all of the time) on which they were to hang, a scene the disciples had seen enough times to catch the drift of [Jesus'] warning . . . In this context, the words ‘take up your cross’ simply meant something equivalent to ‘stick your head in the noose’ or ‘stand in front of the firing squad’ or ‘stretch out your neck over the chopping block’ or ‘sit down in the electric chair’ [Jesus] warned His disciples that they needed to be prepared to sacrifice their lives for His sake.”<sup>2</sup>

And sacrifice they did. His disciples would go on to serve him with fidelity and enthusiasm. And, each of them would meet a similar fate as did he—a gruesome and humiliating death. I’ll not go into the gory details of their deaths just now. But, if ever you want to know more, there are plaques in the downstairs of the church, each with the shield of one of the twelve disciples painted on it. If you climb up on a chair and take down a plaque, you can turn it over and on the back you will find the name of the disciple whose shield it is and a description of how he died. Please refrain from this activity during the pancake lunch as reading some of them could definitely lead to a loss of appetite.

And yet, gory as those stories about the demise of the disciples are, their faith in Jesus and willingness to suffer in order to spread the good news of his love, inspires me. In the gospels, especially Luke’s gospel that we read from today, the disciples are often portrayed as bumbling, wondering, and thick-headed. And yet, they are the ones Jesus chose and in time they grow and mature in faith and in the end they are the ones upon whom the church was founded.

And that’s the good news and the bad news for us this morning. As I’ve quoted before “God does not call the qualified, God qualifies the called.” That’s us. We are here this morning because we are trying to live in ways that respond to God’s calling in our lives. We’re not here because we’re already awesome, we’re here because we’re awestruck by the opportunity to be part of the greatest story ever told. We’re here because we are ripe for transfiguration, we are ready for life to be more beautiful and spiritual.

But, as we learn when we listen to Jesus in this morning’s passage, there are great risks associated with choosing to respond to God’s call on our lives, we are living on the edge when we claim and proclaim our role as disciples of Jesus Christ. The daily choice to take up our cross and follow Jesus is just that, a daily choice. Christianity is not a one and done kind of endeavor. It is an ongoing and intentional way of choosing how we are going to be in this world.

It means choosing to love our neighbor as we love ourselves even when our neighbor proves unloveable time and time again. It means choosing to pray for our enemies when even thinking their name fills us with rage. It means choosing to hold our tongue—or fingers if we’re on social media—when what we might say or type could prove a stumbling block to someone else in her or his faith journey. It means choosing to rise above easy categories and stereotypes and seeking the divine spark in the other. It means choosing to listen to other people and risk learning something that could cause us to change our minds. It means making choices based in love, not fear, in a world that deals in the currency of fear.

A few weeks ago someone told me he is looking for the True North of the life of faith. And as best as I can tell, it’s this—choosing love—no matter the consequences. That is, after all, what Jesus did. He chose love even though he knew what the consequence would eventually be. And if we are earnest in our desire to follow Christ, we will choose to do the same. And that, my friends, is true transfiguration—choosing love—day after day after day after day. No matter what, a Christian chooses love.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://torahportions.foz.org/disciples/mark/picking-up-ones-cross.html>