

*Feast of the Transfiguration**August 6, 2017**Holy Spirit, Cumming*

Happy Feast of the Transfiguration! This is one of the special holy days on the church's calendar that "take precedence of a Sunday." That means we do the lessons and prayers and hymns assigned to recognize and honor the day even when it falls on Sunday. So today we hear the various selections about Moses coming down from the holy mountain and especially the revelation of Jesus' divine sonship on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Transfiguration is one of four times in the stories of the Gospels when the divinity of Jesus is revealed to those around him. First at his birth when the angels appeared to the shepherds and sang of his glory. Then at Jesus' baptism when God's voice gave a similar message that Jesus is God's beloved, God's chosen. And then, of course, Jesus' resurrection from the dead that we remember at Easter and really every Sunday, every day.

This particular revelation of Jesus' divinity is unique in that it is not associated with any other event—not his birth, baptism, or resurrection. We are told that Jesus took three of his disciples and went up a mountain to pray. Probably something Jesus had done with them many times before. But this time was different. Jesus' appearance was changed and two heroes of the Jewish faith—Moses and Elijah—appeared alongside of him to discuss Jesus' soon departure in Jerusalem.

It is hard to imagine what this must have been like for Peter, James, and John. Like so often happens in the Gospels, Peter did not know what to say—but he said something anyway (can you relate?). He made a reasonable religious response—he wanted to commemorate this dramatic experience, this memorable event, like his forefathers had done in other biblical stories. He wanted to set up a tent to honor Jesus and Moses and Elijah. I imagine Peter was overwhelmed and didn't know what to do but wanted to do something. Have you ever felt that way after an experience of the holy?

Peter and his friends' experience then became even more extraordinary. They were overshadowed by the presence of God Almighty. And we're told that God interrupted Peter and his religious ramblings in reaction to his experience. That message of Jesus being chosen and beloved sets the tone of the experience. Then God gives the direction that applied not only back then to the three disciples in the cloud, but for all of us for all time: "Listen to him."

Reflecting on this passage raised a question for me between our special and extraordinary spiritual experiences; and the simple divine direction that echoes through the centuries, "Listen to Jesus." Perhaps some of you, like me, have had an extraordinary spiritual experience. Something we remember in some detail—date, time, who was there with you, and so on. These experiences often cause us to believe God is real.

For some of us, it may have happened in church—a hymn, a sermon, or simply the presence of God’s Spirit that touched us and began something new in us that continues to this day. For others, it might be something outside of church—perhaps a prayer in earnest, out in the world, maybe when we were in distress. And God answered in a dramatic way and reality was forever changed for us. For still others, it may not have been in a religious context, but a sense of God’s majesty in nature—a waterfall, a mountain, a sunset, a newborn baby.

All these ways we experience God are important. Like what Peter, James, and John experienced on the holy mountain. They can be the first step of a life of faith. But there is a second and I would say an almost more important part for us—when our special experience is connected to commitment, to discipleship, to a life of faith that is more than experiences and that includes God’s direction, “Listen to Jesus.”

This way of life is what the church calls conversion. It is so much more than a onetime experience. Paul was knocked off his horse on the road to Damascus, but then he followed the way of Jesus for decades as his conversion continued to unfold. Conversion lasts throughout our lives on earth. Conversion never stops. Conversion is hard— it even hurts us a bit.

I am not talking about religiosity, trying so hard to be good, to follow the rules, to behave well so God will love us. That approach is the opposite of conversion. We believe God loves us deeply and fully. Nothing we do or don’t do can change that. Like Jesus on the mountain, we are God’s beloved.

The hard part, the part that might hurt us at times, is how conversion causes us to grow. We come to see more fully—see the truth of our own lives; and at least in part the truth of others’ lives, too. Seeing like that brings more understanding, more repentance, more forgiveness, and at times a holy discomfort as we move through the course of our lives.

You see, as we open our eyes, our conversion opens our heart to live with other people in a different way-- including fellow disciples and neighbors and strangers who cross our paths. Listening to Jesus will mean different things in different situations. But if we are paying attention, we will grow as people of faith. There are many ways this may happen:

Like a church member who offends us. The neighbor across the street who annoys us. The boss who takes credit for our work. The relative who lets us down-- over and over. The people we learn to forgive over time because we “listen to Jesus.” The people we stay in relationship with because we are committed to love others in Jesus’ name. The people we come to the Lord’s Table with and serve with and learn with over time, who help us be converted as we grow into the image of Jesus.

And it is not only the hard to love people who help us learn to love. It is often people we love so deeply, people we care for, who help us learn to love. Often as we share times of joy. Other times when they suffer loss or illness. Our conversion comes as we love and care for people even when we can’t do anything to make it better for them. Sometimes all we can do is

just be there and do what we can to comfort someone and let them know we love them. That type of love changes us, deepens us.

We may still have those memorable experiences from time to time like the disciples did on the Mount of Transfiguration. I know I have had a handful over the course of my life. And that is more than enough. I believe God is real. I trust God cares for me and for all of us. But those experiences and that faith are simply the first part of the equation. The rest of it is not always exciting or memorable—but it is the work of conversion that transforms us and help us to be part of God’s transformation of the world.

Here are three ways we can listen to Jesus and practice everyday conversion:

1. **Be in community.** I hope it will be in this congregation. Don’t worry about chasing exciting experiences or working hard. Instead, simply be-- be in relationship. Come to the Sunday liturgy regularly and then stay to talk. Take the initiative to speak with someone new (this applies to first time guests and longtime members). Participate in some type of smaller group—foyers, Bible study, choir. You do not need to be busy, but rather be connected and stay. Community is central to conversion.
2. **Read Scripture.** I am excited that we will be reading *The Path* together as a parish starting after Labor Day. We have over 100 books that have been ordered! I am excited that Bonnie and I will be preaching based on this book; that children, youth, and adult will be studying it in Sunday school; and that we will be studying it in our Thursday Bible study. We will learn our common story together and learn how our ancestors came to grow in their faith.
3. **Persist.** Conversion is much more like marriage than dating. It is based on a covenant relationship between you, God, and God’s people, in and outside of church. It takes time. Ask for God’s help. Trust in God’s ultimate purpose for all this—a community of people who love like Jesus: Mature. Kind. Forgiving. Protecting the innocent. Patient with the hard. Joyful in all things. That’s what God is doing in our lives and in the world. I am glad to be part of it. It is the joy of my life.

Amen.