

The Transforming Power of the Transfiguration
Luke 9:28-36
Lin Grace Rohr
February 14, 2010

On our “current events” bulletin board last Sunday, a five-year-old girl pinned up this Valentine she had made. It’s a pink heart. On the front in green crayon are three hearts, two with smiley faces in them, and one partially colored in. On the back in clear bold printing, “God I heart You.” For many, that’s enough said! “God, I love you, Amen.” It would be decidedly easier to talk about Valentine’s Day today with its cards, candy and emphasis on love, than the Transfiguration with its mystery and challenging message but as we all know it’s not always best to do the easy thing. The Sunday before Ash Wednesday is Transfiguration Sunday, and just as more people will be celebrating Mardi Gras this Tuesday rather than Ash Wednesday the next day, Valentine’s Day is certainly more popular than the Transfiguration of Jesus. That said; let’s look at this mysterious, challenging event recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Today we read Luke’s account of the Transfiguration. The Transfiguration is one of those Gospel stories that have controversy surrounding it. Theologians debate whether it was a pre-Easter event or a post-Easter sighting. Others wonder if it happened at all or if it was a vision of the disciples. Still others believe that it did happen as recorded and it was a unique miracle in that it happened **to** Jesus rather than Jesus’ doing it. I’m intrigued with the uniqueness of Luke’s account of the Transfiguration, which is like that of Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism, in that it begins with prayer. All of these would be reasonable to explore but this year we are going to take going to look at the Transfiguration in general rather than in such specifics. Generally speaking, the Transfiguration challenges us to see Jesus in new ways.

Seeing things in new ways comes from looking at things from different perspectives. Donna in the children’s time used a ladder to give an example of this. The thought ran through my head to preach this sermon from the top of the ladder so that I could have a different perspective. I also had the thought to invite those who wanted to, to come and climb the ladder so that everyone would have a chance to gain a new perspective on the sanctuary this morning. Both fleeting ideas were quickly dismissed for obvious reasons! Mostly from the words of Marge Morganthaler at Christmas time when I was standing at the top of this 13 foot ladder putting decorations on our Narthex tree; she asked me, “Lin, if you fall would you sue the church!” In case you are wondering, my answer was no!

Whether it’s climbing ladders or climbing mountains, gaining new perspectives on things is essential. We get into ruts and even the most extraordinary things or people become ordinary after continued contact. This is part of what was going on at the transfiguration. The inner circle of disciples, Peter, James and John, had been invited again by Jesus to come with him while he prayed. We don’t know how many times Jesus asked them to do so...but this time we’re told that they were weighed down with sleep...but they did stay awake enabling them to see Jesus in a new, transformed way, his face changed and his clothes dazzling white, and to see two pivotal people of their Jewish faith, Moses, representing the Law and Elijah, representing the prophets.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, the disciples saw in a new way what Jesus meant from his words on the Sermon on the Mount “Do not think I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets, no, I have come to fulfill them.” We all know Jesus’ prophetic summary of the law, “to love the Lord our God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself” sounds like we’re slipping back into celebrating Valentine’s Day, doesn’t it! All this we’re familiar with so how can we see Jesus in new ways today.

Metaphorically speaking, and only metaphorically speaking, we climb the ladder! We step up, out of our ordinary experiences and we step away from our usual accepted interpretations and look at things from a new perspective. For example, one western theologian has this new perspective on Jesus’ prophetic summary of the Law, “Our culture has a very sentimental notion of love. The assumption is that everyone is born with a loving disposition that gets messed up by the institutions of society. All the problems of the world would be easily solved, it is presumed, if people would only be true to their own nature and act lovingly toward others. The Christian understanding is very different. The power to love comes from beyond ourselves, and the practice of love, like the practice of every Christian virtue, requires a lifetime of training. The transformation of human beings from self-preoccupation to concern for others does not happen in an instant. Christian life is a journey from an old to a new way of life. God gives us time and patiently guides us on this journey...to release us from our bondage of self-centeredness to a life centered in love of God and neighbor.”¹

That’s one person’s hearing Jesus’ words in new ways. From atop the ladder how can we see Jesus in new ways? From atop the ladder...from a place of looking at things from a new perspective we look at what we hold onto and examine if there are other ways to see Jesus. For some examples: if we mostly see Jesus’ ministry of actions, how can we see Jesus in new ways through his ministry of prayer? If we mostly see Jesus’ contemplative life, how can we see Jesus in new ways through his ministry of actions? If we mostly see Jesus as a social revolutionary, how can we see Jesus in new ways as the Good Shepherd? If we mostly see Jesus as the Good Shepherd, how can we see Jesus in new ways as a social revolutionary? If we mostly see Jesus as the good teacher, how can we see Jesus in new ways as the Savior and if we mostly see Jesus as Savior how can we see Jesus in new ways as the good teacher. These kinds of dichotomies can be drawn in almost every area of Jesus’ teaching and preaching and his very being; for example, how do we see in new ways, Jesus, the Prince of Peace wrecking havoc in a fit of anger in the Temple? As we are on this life time journey from an old way of seeing to a new way of being, our challenge is to constantly consider in what new ways are we seeing Jesus? This goes for us as individuals and as institutions of faith.

As institutions of faith, churches throughout the centuries have “climbed ladders” to get new perspectives on Jesus and living the Christian faith in the contemporary society. Let’s look at a few examples, in the 16th, 17th `18th centuries and beyond, Scripture was used to diminish scientific advancement. In the 18th & 19th century, Scripture was used to support slavery in the United States. Up into our century, Scripture is being used to suppress women and children, gay and lesbian individuals and people who have been divorced. Some believe that Scripture and the protestant work ethic have helped promote capitalism at the expense of others’ well-being. So as institutions of faith, we “climb the ladder.” As Protestants in the reformed tradition we know it is essential to keep seeing Jesus in new ways ~ we know it is essential to keep reforming. A

specific challenge we face at this time, and we're beginning to climb the steps of the ladder is the pervasive concern that mainline churches' membership is declining, and we grapple with why that is...is it because we can't see Jesus in new ways? Now the mainline churches aren't going to swing into the fundamentalist experience of faith nor are we going to swing into a hybrid of new age theology and scientology. A challenge we face from a new perspective atop a ladder is what does it mean to be a mainline, protestant church today? Rooted in our traditions and committed to an informed faith, how do we see the radiance of Christ, brilliantly, dazzlingly, new, for our day and time?

Our text on the Transfiguration can help us again. At the end of the miraculous moment, a cloud comes and overshadows them and from the cloud a voice, "This is my Son, my beloved, listen to him!" From the mountaintops to the top of a ladder; from our churches and homes, businesses and schools, from every area of our individual and communal lives we are to listen to Jesus in new ways...beginning with his prophetic summary of the Law... "love God and love others as you love yourself." "Not with a sentimental notion of love but with the power of love that comes from God who is love. The power of love to release us from our bondage of self-centeredness to a life centered in love of God and neighbor."² Remember this, the little girl's Valentine; that says, "I heart You God." On this Valentine's Day, what would your valentine to God be? When I ran spell check on this sermon, I got a new insight. "I heart you God" was corrected to "I hear You God." What greater way to love God than to listen to God's beloved in new ways! Amen!

1. Daniel Migliore, *The Power of God and the gods of Power* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) page 101
2. Ibid