

MARCH 6, 2022

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Rest. Reflect. Refresh. Regroup. Recommit.

Lent 2022

SERMON February 27, 'Find A New Deck' 2 Corinthians 3:10-4:2, Luke 9:28-43

This week we are following the lectionary, and the lectionary has us on Transfiguration Sunday. As you might expect, the scriptures center around this incredible moment in Jesus' ministry. What might surprise you is that it goes beyond that moment to even more, and in doing so opens the transfiguration up to a much more practical sensibility even in our day and age.

The transfiguration itself is a marvelous moment. Jesus is on a mount with the three "heavy hitter" disciples, Peter, John, and James. They witness Jesus transformed. His clothes become "dazzling white." To use the term "veil" that will be used in diverse ways here, we see the veil between the material and spiritual worlds parted. We see Jesus' fleshly presence stripped away to reveal God's glory all over and about Him. He is shown to be truly the Messiah.

This is evidenced by whom He is flanked.

On one side is Moses, the great Law giver and deliverer. Moses is a key and looming figure for the Jews. On the other is Elijah. Elijah the greatest of prophets. So great he was assumed to heaven, never tasting death. In fact even today there is a tradition of the Elijah seat. Keep an empty seat at the dinner table in the event Elijah chooses to return at your own meal.

The representation is that each of these is subservient to Christ, they are inferior. The greatest figures in Jewish tradition bow before Jesus. This is further evidence and marker that Jesus is truly the Messiah.

This idea of transfiguration isn't limited to Jesus in this moment.

One of the other lectionary passages for this morning comes from Exodus. It is the passage where Moses comes down from Mount Sinai and his face is glowing and radiant. He has just had an encounter with the glory of God. That glory is evident to the point that others can't even look him in the face. He has to wear a veil to allow them to see himself. Another idea of veil. The glory of God is concealed because it's too much to bear.

What Moses shows us is that the glory of God can manifest itself not only in the person of Christ, but in each of us as well. This glory beamed from Moses in a way that was unable to be missed. It was so intense that he had to shield people from it.

In Corinthians, we see another sense of both veil and the glory of God. There is now a sense that a veil has been put up by people not to shield others from God's glory, but to wittingly shield ourselves from it. The veil is our intentional blinding ourselves to God's glory. Yet at the same time, the passage reveals that when we take that veil away we not only are exposed to God's glory, but we exclude it. We shine it to the world. We too become a beacon drawing others to Christ even as we reach out to them.

This leads us to a very practical reality. What does showing the glory of God mean for our ministry?

Recently I've had an illustration come to my attention that is incredibly apt for this question. I attend a monthly training with a group of pastors where we read a book and then discuss it's implications for ministry and leadership. In this last month's discussion the illustration that struck me most significantly is that of a deck of cards.

The illustration is really about the nature of our thinking. The thinking is congregational vs. Kingdom. It's important to keep in mind that one isn't superior to the other. It's simply important to keep BOTH in mind as we minister.

Imagine a deck of cards shuffled a thousand times. A thousand different configurations. Yet despite the different configurations, the deck always remains the same. 52 cards. No more, no less.

Christianity is suffering right now because most churches that are striving to reach new people for Christ are more drawing from other congregations. Don't misunderstand, if there are folks leaving a congregation because of dissatisfaction, we need to welcome one another with open arms. Their gifts and spirit are welcome, necessary, and valued. The question at hand here though is about the Kingdom.

We can catch and serve one another, those who already believe in Christ. But what about those who don't? Jesus' call wasn't to simply shuffle around the current mass of believers. What we're largely doing is just that. We shuffle some from one congregation to another. One diminishes while the other grows. The congregation that grows is certainly glad. But what of the Kingdom? When we move a set of believers from one church to another, the Kingdom stays steady. There is no growth or loss.

We are reshuffling the same deck. We need to start drawing from a different one. That is the deck of the unbeliever and the unchurched.

Doing so requires something many of us are not wanting to do. It requires us to become uncomfortable. If people aren't coming to our open doors, we have to go where they are. We have to rub elbows with folks who are different. We have to open up to groups that don't necessarily stand for what we do. We must insert ourselves into those places where other people may say "why is so and so hanging around there/them?"

In other words, when the glory of God is revealed in us, through all of its unique expressions, we have to transport it. We bring the glory of God to those who need it. Boldly we break down the barriers put up by man for the sake of sharing Jesus with those who need Him desperately. In our own transfiguration we step into the new and perhaps even the strange to let them see what God's glory is doing in us so that they too can be invited into that same life changing, enlivening, and redeeming experience.

Fortunately, if we go these places we're in good company. Jesus frequented with those that the religious muckity mucks called sinners. He wisely stated that "those who are well have no need of the doctor, but those who are sick..." His practice was to go to those uncomfortable places. Because it was there that they needed the message the most.

Too often the fear is that in going where the sin happens to be we might become "infected". Yet Paul says that he will "become all things to all people so that my all means some might be saved." In other word, going to those who don't yet believe doesn't have to be a threat. Nonbelievers being a danger to us isn't a sign of the danger of the nonbeliever, but rather a weakness of our own faith. We can be uncompromising in our behavior while at the same time relating to those who don't share our faith.

So if we do this then what? What's next? More discomfort.

If we succeed in going to the places where the nonbelievers congregate (because they aren't congregating with us), it means the community of faith must deal with a whole new category of person. We must openly welcome folks who don't know "the rules". They need to be loved, given grace, and welcomed unconditionally. We must be willing to be those people. We must be that presence.

Think of the expression "reach" people for Christ. Reaching is about going TO. Drawing is about pulling FROM. Our task is to go to those who don't know Christ or who have self excluded from the richness of a community of faith. We build relationship, grow in understanding one another, and we pray inspire a desire to forge or deepen a relationship with Jesus.

This isn't unlike Peter when he went with Cornelius. He was called to "break the rules". Jews weren't supposed to associate with Gentiles. God told him that no longer should he view Gentiles as unclean, and those barriers were not God made but man made. After journeying with the men Cornelius sent to bring Peter to Caesarea, it seems Peter realized that these devout Gentiles weren't that bad after all. Likely he found that much of what he'd been taught about them was untrue. The result is that this Christian faith was opened up to include the entirety of humanity. The mission field expanded, and the growth of the church ensued in grand form.

We also see that upon his return to Jerusalem Jewish Christians weren't comfortable with Peter cavorting with Gentiles. Despite their misgivings, ultimately they celebrated this inclusion when Peter shared the dreams he had along with Cornelius' vision.

Yes, it can be uncomfortable when those who are different come among us. At the same time like with Peter, it can be eye opening and heart opening. We can see how similar we are to those we may have thought to be so different. In doing so, our eyes to see become more like the eyes of Christ and less like human eyes blurred with rules that God never intended to be made. It is freeing because we are given permission to simply love. No rules, just love.

Ultimately if we know transformation needs to occur, we must rely on our own statements of faith that it is God's Spirit that does this work. Not us. We can't change anyone. All we can do is usher them into the presence of God and trust that in our modeling and the Holy Spirit's working they will slowly transform into the best people they can be before God. Our role is welcome, humility, openness, and patience. God does the heavy lifting of changing the heart.

In this lies a challenge for all of us. In 2022, we have an opportunity to expand our "deck". We have the opportunity to not only grow our congregation but also the Kingdom of God. But it will take courage and work. One of the starting points is seeing the "get to" over the "have to".

When we see something as "has to" be done it feels like a chore. When we see it as "get to" it becomes a privilege. We get to step out of our comfort zone into a new field of people we've never known before. We get to feel God at work and trust that we'll see fruit from the labor. We get to be Peter going to the Gentiles and Paul opening his heart to any circumstance and context while maintaining his own personal faithfulness to see lives won for Christ.

Each of us have our own circles and own places we frequent. Each of us have those people and places we're hesitant to approach because of man made rules and judgements. Let's each of us zone in on 3 such groups or places. Then pick one, just one. Pick one to reach out into. Not just once, but as a habit. Commit to getting to know people and build honest relationships and connections. See what God does.

You may be the Peter that opens up a whole new mission field. You may be the Peter that has a heart experience that changes not only your own impression of who and where we need to focus, but in sharing it you change the rest of us as well. If we all do this, we commit to building God's Kingdom here and now. We may even change the world. Maybe not the entire world, but at least our world. The one where we live and love each and every day.

BIBLE STUDY- Acts 12

Now that the Gentiles have been included into the mission of the church, we see a stark turn take place. King Herod, the secular king of the region, and therefore the Jews, has taken sides with the Sanhedrin in perceiving that this new band of Jesus followers is a threat or danger to Israel. As Passover arrives James and Peter are arrested. For some reason, James is beheaded while Peter is spared. At the time, beheading was considered one of the harshest punishments one could receive. Knowing that James likely wasn't prone to commit any of the crimes that would merit such a punishment, it's not a far stretch to assume that whatever charges laid on him were false. Not unlike those laid on Jesus and Stephen before him.

The image here is that something is changing in the leadership of the early church and their perception in the community. Unlike Judas at the beginning of the book, James isn't replaced. Perhaps there were no more followers who fit the criteria for apostolic leadership. Perhaps something else was going on in the political, social, and religious landscape of the time. Regardless, now it seems that when an apostle is done, that's one less and so the line of apostles is dwindling.

What does this mean for the church? It means the same then as it does now. When the initial figurehead(s) pass on to other pastures, the void is left to be filled. What must happen is for the next wave of leaders to rise to the task and continue the mission that has been set out.

Whomever would step in has to recognize that their leadership will be on new terms. They were not necessarily gifted as the apostles were. They would be gifted differently. We trust that their abilities are granted by God to suit the time, place, and purpose they are in. For every new leader past, present, or future this becomes critical. So many question their qualifications because they compare themselves to the leaders they follow. This is unfair. No two of us are the same. God doesn't call us to lead identical to the ones before us. God calls us to lead in our own strengths, our present context, and to the best of our abilities. This is how the church shifts and adapts to new circumstances. New leaders emerge who are uniquely suited to a new task.

The other side of this is that those being led must also be flexible enough to embrace this new leadership. Hanging on to what "used to be" is an exercise in futility. If God has called someone to lead, this has happened for a reason. Yes, we have to discern our leaders. At the same time we also have to discern our hearts and if we have issue with a new direction be faithful and reflective regarding if our issue is genuinely because the direction is faulty, or if it's because our own preferences are being offended (even if the new direction is precisely what God is calling us to).

Herod was known to be vicious and fickle, a dangerous combination. This is only relevant in that it makes it somewhat odd and even incongruent that he would be vicious and bloodthirsty towards these Jews who have experienced and are spreading the liberating message of the gospel, yet observing the Passover, a festival of liberation and deliverance, with such "reverence."

We then see the miraculous story of Peter's release from prison. Luke tells this story with intention. He is arrested and placed in arguably the most secure position possible for a prisoner. His plight is hopeless and his outcome feared as he's already seen James beheaded. The only way out is divine intervention. Divine intervention is granted. The message? Even the most extreme interruptions by the secular and the wicked to stop the gospel will be thwarted. We may not know how or when, but we do know it is God's desire for the message to go out. Somehow it perseveres.

Here we see a tradition that continues to persist to this day occur. An angel comes, wakes Peter, and ushers him out of jail and to the safety of other believers. When he arrives the believers are in disbelief. They think the voice on the other side of the door is Peter's "angel" This isn't a sense that Peter has died and his spirit is coming to them. It is a sense that his guardian angel has come.

Even now we have this sense that people have guardian angels. With stories like this one, that is a comforting thought. God has appointed a divine guardian to watch over us and protect us. We must be careful, however, to not overattribute circumstances to such a being. For every moment where we say our angel has saved us, how many more are there where someone was not saved? Even here James was not spared. Is it only some who have a guardian? Do these angels take lunch and coffee breaks? How do they decide when to intervene and when not to? All of this is a mystery. What is far more certain is that God love us, cares for us, and whether our angel is active or napping, can use the outcome of any circumstance to continue the spread of the gospel.

This room full of believers also displays something that is perfectly normal in our humanity. They were praying for a miracle, but when it happened they didn't initially believe it. Peter shows up after their prayers for his release and even when told he's at the door disqualify the report. How often do we do the same? We pray for the impossible, and in the instances when it comes to pass we don't grab onto it immediately? We pray with "expectation".....but only to a point sometimes.

Seeing this play out as it does puts the lie to an oft spread sense about prayer. "You'll only get a 'yes' if you pray with absolute faith it will come to pass." Clearly this isn't the case here. Fervent as they were, they doubted even as the results were literally knocking on the door. God works as God will. God works through both our faith and despite our doubts.

Knowing this, our eyes and hearts should be open to see where God is answering what we lift in prayer. The answer may be yes, no, or not right now. The answer may not come as we think or hope it will. Regardless, if we're not on the lookout and expecting an answer we may never spot it, even if it's right in front of us. Pray with expectation while being attentive to what may be unexpected.

That we're told the Jewish people were on board with whatever Herod had planned to befall Peter tells us that something has shifted in the popularity of the apostles. We don't know precisely what. Maybe seeing Herod become violent towards these "Christians" had the Jews scared back into their faith. Maybe at this point in Jerusalem they had converted all the Jews they were going to convert and those who did not were devout and passionate to stamp out these new heretics.

Whatever the case, Peter going on "to another place" signals his exit from being the prime mover in Luke's telling of the story of the early church. The book is about to transition. Peter leaving the city explains why they couldn't find him as they searched.

The story of Herod's demise shows us a great contrast between the secular and the believer. Herod is a picture of arrogance and brutality. The guards on duty when Peter escaped are executed for their lack of diligence. Herod is taking all credit and even divine authority for himself as he grants an audience to some men coming in search of food. They had to grovel for simple sustenance and Herod revels in it.

Note the difference here. Herod represents the secular in pride, selfishness, and cruelty. He is stingy with even the most necessary of things for the people he reigns over to survive. On the other hand we know that the Christians are generous and humble. The share and share alike, uplifting those in need without question or concern. The chapter literally ends highlighting that Saul and Barnabas return from their relief effort to Judea (remember last chapter), a contrast of generosity and servanthood up against Herod's grandiosity and tight fistness.

Herod's death is a warning not terribly unlike Ananias and Sapphira. To not give God God's due can carry with it a high cost. Herod's

attitude and actions that pit him as an absolute enemy of God, and by association these Christians who steadfastly strive to serve God, mean he will meet a gruesome end. The reference to worms is to highlight that the vileness of his spirit is evidenced in the vileness of his death.

On the other hand, the gospel continues to spread and thrive. Once again we see the message that even amidst persecution, the powerful and hopeful Word of God revealed through the gospel is compelling to those wanting to believe. When we hear Christians today fault the attitude of the world for the lack of spread of the gospel, we do well to think back to this early church who were undergoing much harsher and deadlier times simply because of their belief. Persecution in this instance isn't where the gospel dies but instead lives and lives powerfully. Perhaps this is because in persecution one must have the utmost of genuine faith to remain a believer. This faith, which evidences itself in love, compassion, mercy, kindness, openness, and understanding is the antidote for what ails the world. We are called to precisely the same spirit today in our modern context.

Lent

Rest
FROM OBSESSIONS

Reflect
ON GOD'S MERCIES

Refresh
FAITH & PURPOSE

Regroup
WITH FAITH FAMILY

Recommit
TO CHRIST'S CALLING

Marion
+ First
UMC