

# Sermon for Transfiguration Sunday – February 3, 2008

## We Are One In Christ

*Rev. John Benham*

A new graduate from the seminary had quite the wake up when he went out to his first congregation, a country church which had a long history. As he was conducting his first worship service, he noticed right away that everyone sat on one side of the church. That seemed sort of strange. When it came time to sing the sermon hymn, the new pastor was amazed to see the entire congregation stand up, walk over to the other side of the church and sit down to sing. This new pastor couldn't figure it out. No one explained it to him. The same thing happened week after week. Finally the pastor pieced it together: many years earlier, the church was heated by a woodstove over on one side of the building. The building was cold during the winter. When people first got to church, everyone sat on one side, close to the woodstove. As the service would go on, the woodstove would get very warm, too warm for comfort, and so the congregation developed the practice of moving over to the other side of the church before the sermon.

Even though the church building had been remodelled several times and the woodstove had long since been replaced, the congregation still kept its practice of changing sides during the service. Most of the members didn't even know why; it was just something they did every Sunday.

We all have habits in life and in the church. Steven Covey in his book ***The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*** captures for me an important truth he calls "inside out". He suggests that personal change happens when we focus on the motives and character within each one of us. In other words, if you want to have a more co-operative teenager, be a more understanding, empathetic consistent parent. If you want more latitude in your place of work then be a more responsible, more helpful employee. What would you have to "do" and who would you have to "be" to strengthen our ministry of Christ in this community called St. Paul's?

I think Jesus offers that answer in the story on Mount Tabor. Let's journey with Jesus and James, John and Peter up the mountain to be alone with him in prayer and experience the power of transfiguration. Transfigured or the more common word is "change" is what happen before our very eyes. Yes there was a bright flash of light and his clothes as white as snow. Something supernatural is happening and we're not sure if we should be afraid or filled with joy.

The "high mountain of Tabor" harks back to stories of Moses' commission on Mt. Horeb and the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai. The blinding brightness of Jesus' clothes is a replica of God's agent in the Book of Daniel (7:9) where the

Ancient One was dressed in clothes as "white as snow." The whiteness is meant to be a white that human beings cannot manufacture on their own. The appearance of Moses and Elijah connects Jesus with Israel's two most important prophets. The overshadowing cloud is the same as the divine presence in the cloud of the Exodus and at Sinai. Transfiguration –change within is the God's work not ours!

I saw a transfiguration last summer when I watch my children at the Art Museum in Ottawa. There was the look on my teenage daughter's face when I saw her see a painting by Monet. She was not looking as she once had looked. She appeared awe struck, changed by what she saw; and it changed me, too, to realize how deeply moved she was. I let go of a piece of my parenting forever that day, and neither of us came home from the museum the same. There is no going back from such moments when new things have been mastered, no matter how small. Fredrick Buechner says we have all seen transfigurations like that, fleeting instants when a human face is transformed by understanding or beauty or joy.

People do change and that's the good news of Transfiguration. His name is Father Greg Boyle, and he works with gangs in the neighbourhoods of Los Angeles. He has worked there for well over twenty years. In his work he has seen things that might make anyone give up hope. He has buried many teenagers who were victims of gang warfare. He has watched mothers bury not one but all their sons. He has sat by beds of shooting victims and beating victims in hospitals, some of whom never recover. He says mass in 25 jails, but he has also started a business that employs ex-gang members, since kids coming out of prison who are tattooed from head-to-toe are not exactly what employers have in mind when looking for people to man their counter or their cash register. So he started a silk-screen t-shirt factory, and he employs kids there. In the factory kids from rival gangs work side-by-side. "Usually," says Father Boyle, "when a kid begins and is told there will be former members of rival gangs at work beside him, the kid will say, 'Well, I just won't talk to them.'

But after a time and a short time at that, they do begin to talk, and they get to know each other. And the old label of enemy or rival gives way to the name co-worker and sometimes friend." Interviewer Teri Gross asked Boyle if he had met kids who he knew would be hopeless to try and help, and he said every time he thought he'd met a kid he could never reach, they, too, turned out to be people who wanted regular lives and homes and families and freedom from what they had known in gangs. She asked him if he talked about the gospel with these kids. "Not really," he answered. "It's more important," he said, "to live as if the truth were true, to go where love has not yet arrived, choose to stand with the folks that God chooses to stand with."

We are not alone our God is with us as we journey into the season of Lent where the wilderness does leave us thirsty for truth and direction. I know some

days we just feel overwhelmed by decisions, and puzzled with where God is calling us personally and as a church and how are we to serve and encourage ourselves and others to leave the comfortable habits of life to follow Christ.

Back on the Mountain Peter is babbling about building a shrine to keep Jesus glowing in a special place and today someone of us would grab our cell phones to hold on to the holy moment when out of the misty cloud a divine voice proclaims ***'This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him!'*** This is the high point of the Transfiguration story. Everything has been building up to this moment. Listen to him.

Jesus, glowing in majesty and power and glory, reaches out to them, offering them a surprisingly tender hand. Holy strength and power to overcome all of human trials and agonies that knock us off of our feet is concentrated into a touch. **"Get up and do not be afraid"**. As the four of them wind their way back down the mountain, Jesus instructs them to tell no one about what they saw until after he has suffered and died and been raised (Matt. 17:7-9). The disciples not only have their instructions, but they learn that there are some rough days ahead for their teacher, and consequently for them.

You and I can be witnesses of Christ's transfiguration just as surely as Peter and Jesus and John were. We are in that story too. We do have crosses to bear, pains to endure, crisis to face. And as we move into Lent, our crosses and Christ's cross will occupy more of our attention. We do carry crosses, but we do not carry them by our own strength alone. **We are one in Christ.**

This past year, we have been praying for our leaders of Council and Trustees and Long Range Planning, JNAC committee. Today we express our gratitude for their service in Christ. **(list their names please stand)** Today we welcome new leaders **(list their names)** to serve in faith knowing that every single member, adherent, and worshipper has a special part to play in our ministry.

Years ago, Henri Nouwen wrote: ***"The basis of all ministry is the experience of God's unlimited and unlimiting acceptance of us as beloved children, and acceptance so full, so total and all-embracing, that it sets us free from our compulsion to be seen, praised, and admired and free for Christ who leads us on the road of service."*** **We Are One In Christ.** Thanks be to God.