

Sermon on the Transfiguration, Feb. 11, 2024

The Transfiguration story has a real fascination for us. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up this high mountain and he is revealed before them. They see him shining like the sun, his clothes dazzling white. They see Moses and Elijah with him, talking about his “departure,” Luke tells us, his death. They see the shining cloud overshadow them all and hear God’s voice speaking from the cloud, as others have done before and since, the bright cloud of God’s presence. And then the experience passes and they return to the plain, and their lives go on, but they are changed by this encounter with God, this spiritual vision they have had.

Have you ever seen anyone shining like that? Or felt or seen that bright cloud of God’s presence? There are lots of examples of this sort of thing in Scripture. Moses’ face shone like the sun after he’d been up Mt. Sinai, being with God in the cloud of God’s presence. St. Stephen’s face shone like an angel’s when he sees a vision of heaven, just before they stone him to death. When King Solomon dedicates the Temple, the cloud of God’s presence fills it and all the people leave, it’s so intense they can’t bear it.

I’ve seen people who were exceptionally shiny. An Indian guru named Sri Sri Ravi Shankar sometimes seemed to shine like the sun to me. I’ve seen priests shining when they were celebrating the Eucharist. We often say a bride or a new Mom is radiant (shiny), and I’ve seen that newly ordained priests are also pretty shiny looking. That wears off after a while! When I was working in the hospital, I got there one morning and the charge nurse asked me to go visit a certain patient, who was dying. I walked into the room. She was unconscious and her family were around her, very devout people, peacefully praying the rosary. And the minute I stepped through the door, I felt the presence of God so strongly. I felt like I should take off my shoes because I was standing on holy ground.

Have you ever experienced anything like this? Seen someone who seemed to be glowing? Perhaps not shining like the sun but just radiant? A really attractive warm spirit about them? Or felt the presence of God so strongly? Not everyone does feel it in these ways, so don’t feel badly if you haven’t so far. The other 9 disciples didn’t and they did just fine. Sometimes it’s much more subtle, too, a feeling of warmth and safety with a certain person, maybe, or in a church. I’ve felt it here.

So here’s a question for you to ponder: Was Jesus exceptionally shiny that day? Or were the disciples exceptionally perceptive that day? Were they just able to see what was always there but which they didn’t normally notice? I’m inclined to think a little of both. Jesus had gone up there to pray. Luke suggests he was looking for some encouragement from God about his impending death. And God sent him the embodiment of the Law and the Prophets, Moses and Elijah. And also the cloud of his presence, the Shekinah, and God’s own words of encouragement, “My beloved son.” But I also think the disciples were more perceptive than usual and were able to see Jesus’ true nature that day in a way that they hadn’t before. And maybe didn’t after either.

I believe the eyes of their heart, of their soul, their spiritual eyes were open that day to see spiritual things not visible to our flesh and blood eyes.

St. Paul talks about this a little, about the gospel being veiled to those who don't believe. There are a number of examples in the Bible of God opening people's eyes so they can see angels, who were there before but they didn't see them. If you're interested, there's a great story about Balaam and his donkey in Numbers 22.

I've been thinking about this all week. I read somewhere that human beings tend to form a judgement about a person in the first couple minutes after they meet them. I suppose this comes from caveman days when we had to decide quickly if someone is a threat or not. And we often make up our minds based on all sorts of things that have nothing to do with who the person actually is. Maybe they remind me of the kid who beat up my brother in grade 3. Or the person who helped me out of a fix once. And once we make up our minds about a person, we tend to notice the things that reinforce our judgement and ignore the things that don't. Or explain them away to reinforce our opinion. We let our bad opinion blind us to the good in them or our good opinion blind us to the bad. That's what happens when we see people with our flesh and blood eyes.

But if we can look at people with the eyes of our spirit, or our soul, we see them differently. First of all, we can see the image of God in them, the image of Christ. Because it's there in all of us. In some people it may be buried a bit more deeply than in others. Some people may shine it out better than others, the way a glass jar lets out a candle's light better than a clay jar. I've told you before that I like to pray that I will see the face of Christ in each person I meet. When I succeed in doing that, it changes the way I treat that person and it sometimes upsets my initial judgement of them. But with the eyes of our spirit open, we can see this image of Christ. And we tend to see the whole of a person, good and bad, healthy and wounded, and accept that it's all actually part of who they are. We start to see them as God does.

In my life I have met a lot of people. I don't think I have yet met any wholly good or a wholly bad person. Every person I have met has had some good qualities, some bad qualities, some areas where they shine with the light of Christ and some areas which are definitely a bit murky. The worst people I've ever met had some redeeming qualities, if I look for them. The best people had some blind spots and scars.

So what does this mean for us? If we can pray for God to open our eyes, our spiritual eyes, to see people the way he sees them, to see the shining image of Christ in each person, it will change the way we think about them and the way we treat them. We will see deeper than the surface and we will start to behold the loveliness of each human being. And we will drop our judgemental attitude, too, and be able to love them as Christ does.

I have pretty much always been able to see the good in people. I am aware that some people think I'm naïve, but seeing the good doesn't mean closing my eyes to the bad. Because I know that most people are a mixture of good and bad. When I first came here, I had heard quite a lot about a number of individuals in the parish and I heard a lot more in the first few months after I arrived. Good and bad. But I came with a firm resolve to see

each person as a precious child of God, to see the good in them, without ignoring the bad side. I came resolved not to judge people but to love them. And I think this attitude is the key to the successes I've had in helping to resolve the conflicts in this church, to heal some of the hurts that sometimes led to bad behaviour, and be a pastor to all of you.

We can all do this. St. Paul says today, "The god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Our worldly minds, or our physical eyes, do not see the glory of Christ which shines all around us. Like the disciples most days. He goes on to say that God who made light shine out of darkness, shines in our hearts to show us the glory of God. Even in the darkness of our own lives, God makes his light to shine and helps us see it. Even in the darkness of our judgements of one another, God makes his light shine and changes our vision.

Our goal in the Christian life is not to see amazing visions, like Elijah being taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire, drawn by horses of flame. Or even to see and hear the bright cloud of God's presence. If that happens, it's a gift, but it's not the bread and butter of our Christian lives, which is lived out on the plain, in our ordinary lives. But if the eyes of our hearts are opened, then we will see God all around us. We will see Christ in each person we meet, and since we love Christ, it will be easier to love each other person. Not necessarily always easy, but easier. Our own attitudes and judgements will sometimes prevent us from seeing this. But it's there nonetheless, like Jesus' shining presence. And one of the strengths of Christian community is that hopefully we have the grace to see Christ in each other and to love each other because of it, which strengthens the loving bond of the community.

So here's a Lenten discipline we might like to try this Lent (which starts Wednesday in case you hadn't noticed). Try fasting from judging others. Give up judging others as our Lenten fast. And take on praying to see the face of Christ in each person we meet. Actively look for it. Ask for the eyes of our spirits to be opened so we can see the face of Christ. And while we're at it, we could also pray that the love of Christ will shine through us so others can see it clearly. Now there's a real spiritual discipline for you! Much harder than giving up chocolate.

If you think you might need a little help with this, you might decide to put a dime in the PWRDF box every time you catch yourself thinking a judgy thought about someone else. I think I might do this this year. Any time we write someone off or think ill of them, with no sense of compassion. We might still see the flaws, and that's OK, kind of like seeing someone with a nasty wound in their leg. We notice the wound. But do we respond by thinking, "They're pretty useless now. They'll just be a drag on me. I'm going to leave them behind?" Or do we respond with caring and compassion, and maybe slow our pace so they can keep up? Help them along? Make them a crutch? One way is writing them off and being judgy and the other is seeing them and loving them as Christ's own beloved.

Learning to see with the eyes of our spirit instead of just the eyes of our flesh takes a concentrated effort and Lent is a good time to work on that. We need to pray for help. But if we take this on, we may be surprised at how much goodness we see around us, the

goodness of God in human form. If we can drop our initial judgements and look deeper, we may be surprised by the gems we find, in human form. And this will not only help us to follow Jesus more nearly, it will also help build up this community of Emmanuel church. It will help us to love one another, including even the people we may perhaps have judged in the past, and make this community truly what our mission statement says, "A worshipping, loving and welcoming community, joyfully sharing God's gifts." A shiny, transfigured community.