

The Last Sunday after Epiphany: Holy Trinity Church: February 11, 2018

Transfiguration Sunday: Mark 9:2-9:

When We Die to Ourselves, We Rise Transfigured In Christ

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Transfiguration of Jesus Christ marks this final Sunday in Epiphany.

Advent, Christmas and the Season of Epiphany are ended. Next week we will begin Lent with Ash Wednesday and throughout Lent we will prepare our hearts to die with Jesus on the cross of Good Friday in order to rise with Him on Easter Sunday. There is no way around the cross if we truly want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ

Lent is the time we examine how closely we are following Jesus. We talk big about Jesus. We ask, “What would Jesus do?” Or, we say, “I want to be like Christ.” We claim to be followers of Jesus but how closely are we following him and what does it mean to follow him?

Mark's account of the Transfiguration is a good example of how misguided we can sometimes be about following Jesus. Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain for a spiritual retreat. Jesus started to glow and Elijah and Moses appeared to them. Peter thought it would be a good idea for all of them to stay up on that mountain and he even offered to help build a dwelling for all of them. It's kind of funny when you think about it. Peter must have thought it was cool to be up there with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Why not stay there forever and not deal with the realities of life? What Peter did not realize was that the special moment on that mountain was not about escaping the world on a retreat; it was about God confirming once again that Jesus was God's Son and He would die and then rise from the dead. As they followed Jesus back down that mountain he tried to tell them, but they still did not understand. They did not understand that they were following a man who would die and then live again and if they were serious about following him, they would have to die too. Following Jesus is the greatest thing in the world, but it is also the hardest and riskiest thing in the world to do because we cannot do it without going through our own cross.

Jesus was clear about this from the very beginning. Huge crowds followed Him wherever he went. There was this certain energy about him. More than likely, he had charisma. He had a way with words. He performed miracles. He

challenged people in authority. He loved everyone, especially the left out, thrown out, and the down and out. Who wouldn't love a guy like that?

One day Jesus looked over a huge crowd and he wondered if they really knew what it meant to follow him. Then with no regard for what is taught in a Dale Carnegie course on "How to Win Friends and Influence People," Jesus spoke some of the hardest words we find any-where in the gospels. He said, "Do you really want to follow me? Consider what it is going to cost you. You must give up everything that is dearest to you, take up a cross, and follow me. Unless you do that, you cannot be my disciples." That is not what the crowd wanted to hear over 2,000 years ago and they sure do not want to hear that today in 2018. The crowd thought this charismatic man was on his way to his own empire and throne. They hoped that if they followed him they would share in his power and glory. What they did not realize was that when Jesus said these words he was on his way to Jerusalem and to his cross, and to follow him meant you were also willing to take up a cross. Scripture does not mention it one way or the other but I imagine that after Jesus spoke these words most people in the crowd turned away from Jesus and went home disappointed and dejected. That was not their expectation. They wanted glory, power and privilege. You see my sisters and brothers Jesus is calling us to carry our crosses and die to ourselves and to rise with Him. So what does that mean?

It means this, all the important things in life cost us. We should not be surprised to find that when the most important person who ever lived spoke about the most important thing we could ever do, he said that sacrifice is required, a cross is required, and death is required. Why? Jesus put it poignantly, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

So, what did Jesus mean by that? What did Jesus mean by all this death business? One of the best illustrations of this for me is seen through an experience of one of my closest friends. We met at Providence College in the fall of 1972. Today, Allen is a United Methodist priest. He is also married to a priest. However, there was a time when Allen had other plans for his life. He thought of becoming a veterinarian. He thought of the kind of woman he would marry, the kind of money he would make, and the kind of comfortable life he would lead. None of these thoughts ever included being a pastor or being married to one either! Allen’s life took a different path than he had anticipated. He gave up his plans to be a veterinarian. He gave up his ideas of all that money he wanted to make and the lifestyle he would have, and he became a pastor. You would think that would be the end of the story, right? You would think that he made a good decision and was happy and fulfilled,

right? But one day, Allen felt the cost of his decision. He was serving his second appointment as chaplain of Florida Southern College. He was walking around a lake on campus one day and said to himself, "I am in my mid-thirties. I didn't go to vet school. I am not married. I am not making any money. Here I am, a chaplain of this school, a pastor. I am listening to kids who haven't a clue complain about life." Then Allen, who is not one to go on about such experiences, said that he felt God speak to him in that moment. After all his complaining about all the things he had given up, Allen said he heard God say, "Allen, now we can get started to truly make a priest." Jesus said, "If a grain of wheat does not fall on the ground and die, it will not bear fruit." Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

Mike is another friend of mine. He's a doctor now. We worked together in the maintenance and housekeeping department of Kent County Hospital when we were in Providence College. We dreamt of becoming doctors. We dreamt of the money, the prestige, the country club, a beautiful wife and kids and the Porsche. We never thought about what it really took to become a doctor. We never truly knew that it would take a ton of hard work, lots of sweat and sacrifice. Many years later, no wife, no kids, no money, no country club, no Porsche a bone tired Dr. Mike was in his final year of a 5 year surgical

residency walking down a hospital corridor at 3 o'clock in the morning and felt God speak to him in that moment, "Mike, now we can get started to truly making you a doctor."

You see real life in Jesus Christ only truly begins when we die to ourselves. Real life begins when we die to control. Real life begins when we die to our selfish desires and trivial plans. Real life in Christ begins when we surrender our ego, when we surrender our pride, when we surrender our stubbornness, when we surrender our Porsches. God can get started on us when we come to the place where we are free and available from the bondage of trite preoccupations such as Porsches and country clubs and recognize that our only need is God. This is what it means to die to oneself. That is what it means to pick up our cross and follow Him

There are many who never accept this. This is why there are people who have been Christians all their lives who are never spiritually fulfilled. This is why there are Christians who never grow in their faith. They have never made the decision to be a disciple. Until you become a disciple you will never experience the abundant life in Jesus Christ because that is what it takes. It is a dying to oneself that enables us to serve God and one another. In other words we are transfigured. We are changed. Here in this space God begins the good work in

you and me. But, until we carry a cross and die to ourselves, we will never ever really be available to God because we have not created that space in our lives to let God into our lives.

My dear brothers and sisters, here is the challenge if we want God to use us. It's quite simple. We must make ourselves available to God. We must empty our lives of the things that have become more important than God. We must allow God to cleanse us and renew us. We must come to the place where we pray, "God, I am so tired of doing things on my own. O God, I am so tired of thinking I know what is best. O God, I am so tired of doing the same things over and over again expecting to get different results. O God, I want you to take over my life. I hand all of it over to you. I let go of the things that I have made more important than you O God and I ask you to fill me up. Pour me out! Use me up! Change me God!" If that is your honest prayer, God will move like a tidal wave in your life!

In the summer of 1983, I had just finished my first year in the School of Theology at St. John's Seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts. That summer I was doing my first unit of CPE /Clinical Pastoral Education at St. John's Hospital in Lowell, Massachusetts. I was living in a rectory with two priests serving St. Patrick's Church in Pelham, New Hampshire. I visited a patient in

the hospital with my very unorthodox supervisor that reminded me of the spiritual death that is required of all disciples. He had a way of getting to the truth of things without being abrasive, which is good if you are making your living as a chaplain! We were visiting a patient who was recovering from a drug overdose. The patient was a prominent man in the community. He said to my supervisor, “I have lost everything. I have lost my job. I have lost my wife and family. I have lost my reputation. I have lost my livelihood. I have lost it all. This is the end for me.” My supervisor responded, “Oh, that’s interesting because I see this as just the beginning for you.” The man responded, “What do you mean the beginning for me?” My supervisor said, “Well, you said you have lost everything? Everything?” The patient said, “Yes, everything that really mattered to me.” My supervisor replied, “Well, that means God has you all to Himself. Just think what God can do with you now.”

So my sisters and brothers in Christ, during this Lent, listen to God’s voice calling you to come and die to yourself. Create that space in your life for God. Make yourself available because your life in God’s Son Jesus is truly waiting for you. Amen.