

Matthew 17:1-9
"Listen to Jesus"
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Transfiguration Sunday
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Movement I: Who God transforms is not Jesus, but our perception of Jesus

1. Pigs

You are driving up a narrow mountain road, trying desperately to hug the right edge of the road in case another car is coming down, and your fear of a collision. All of a sudden, you hear loud honking, and coming from around the bend toward you in your lane is a sports car you and he almost collide before you swerve into the lane he is supposed to be, missing him by inches. You catch the other driver's eye, and shoot him a piercing look, and he shouts back at you, "PIGS." You write him off as crazy or on drugs. But when you round that same blind corner from which he came, you encounter a whole herd of pigs, and you also swerve into the wrong lane to miss them. In that moment, you decide you should not have written off the other driver. He was not being inconsiderate of you, and was not trying to insult you. You should have listened to him. We call this a transformative paradigm shift.

2. Unruly children

You are visiting a large city with a subway. At the next stop, a man and four children get on. The children run up and down the car stepping on your feet, making loud noises, and coughing in your face. Their father seems to be ignoring the havoc on the train. So you get up the courage to say something to him. You say, "My family is tired, can you settle your children a little, please?" The father starts crying. He tells you through his sobs that his entire family was in a wreck that totaled their car 8 hours ago, and his wife, their mother, is in a coma from which she is not expected to recover. All the young children know is that mom is hurt, that they have been cooped up all day. They do not understand fully yet what all this means. All of a sudden, your reprimand for the unruly children turns to compassion, when you express your feelings and prayer for him and his family. Again, we call this a transformative paradigm shift.

3. Mutual acquaintance

A friend and I have a mutual acquaintance, one that I perceive as crusty, burned out, cynical, and at times, arrogant. My friend suggests to me that until I put myself in his shoes, I should not write him off. This has been a long hard road, putting myself into his shoes and including him in my circle of friends. With God's help, and a little help from my friend, I have done this, and as Robert Frost says, "That has made all the difference." Another transformative paradigm shift. This kind of paradigm shift is God's work.

4. Our perception of Jesus

You have heard the phrases: "Familiarity breeds contempt," and "A person is not a prophet in his home town." Jesus is one of them, or at best just another rabbi, until Peter's proclamation. Today's scripture, the transfiguration, that is, the transformation of the appearance of Jesus, follows immediately after Peter's recognition that Jesus is the anointed Son of God. Perhaps it is not Jesus that God transforms, but the disciple's

perception of Jesus. It is the disciples' perception of Jesus that is changes forever after Peter's proclamation. Again, this kind of paradigm shift is God's work.

5. Transition

Yes, God changes our perception of Jesus, but God also changes forever our perception of God himself.

Movement II: We need a Trinitarian point of view

1. The voice from heaven

If we think we have a full understanding of God through Jesus alone, whose voice is it that calls to Jesus and his disciples from heaven, saying, "This is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" I am about to say something shocking to you, but please bear with me. God and Jesus are not the same. The image of God speaking to Jesus begs for a clarifying view.

2. Elephant

Have you ever tried understanding the enormity of an elephant using a telescope? Think about it. With a telescope you might see the tail, or the trunk, or the ear, or the leg. But not all at once. God is more than the tail, the trunk, the ear, or the leg. For a comprehensive view of an elephant, you need a wide angle panoramic lens. For a comprehensive view of God, you need a different lens also.

3. Triune nature of God

In the *Gloria Patri*, the *Doxology*, and the Apostle's Creed, which we will recite later today, we say that God's nature is triune: Creating Father, reconciling Son, and comforting and inspiring Spirit. Our creating parent does not go on vacation after Genesis, leaving us home alone. No. First God sends us his Spirit, who speaks to us through the prophets. Then God sends his reconciling Son, whose 33 years of words and healing ministry bridge the gap. Bridge the gap between God and humankind. Bridge the gap not just with his sacrifice and resurrection, but also in his words and deeds. And upon Jesus' ascension to heaven, God sends his Spirit to abide with us forever. His Spirit who speaks to us through the prophets, who comforts us when we need comforting, and who cheerleads and inspires us into action when we tire. To limit God to the 33 years of Jesus' lifespan is as useful as using a telescope to view an elephant.

4. Transition

The Apostle's Creed may be adequate to help us understand our creating parent and God's Spirit, but one of my professors says it falls short in helping us understand Jesus.

Movement III: Worshipping Jesus is more than lifting up his name

1. Worshipping Jesus is also lifting up his words and embodying his deeds

Don't get me wrong. I still love the Apostle's Creed. I really do. But one of my professors says it is not a total confession of the Christian faith and practice. Yes, it says a lot about Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection. But it says as much about the words and deeds of Jesus as the dash between the birth date and the death date on a tombstone. My divinity school professor says a church that ignores Jesus' words and deeds is as sterile and cold as a tombstone.

2. Powell

One of my favorite pictures is that of Powell, with his widespread incurable colon cancer, not letting it stop him from serving the homeless at the Downtown Presbyterian Soup

Kitchen. I know he did not feel like it, but except for the last two months of his life, he came to worship and to session meetings every week. Until the last two months of his life, he did not skip a one. Powell did more than lift up Jesus' name. Powell also lifted up his words, and embodied his deeds. When I feel tired, I look to Powell's life for encouragement. We all can learn from Powell. We shall all miss him. But we celebrate his resurrection into a new life.

3. "Just War"

Need proof that lifting up Jesus' name, but not his words and deeds, is harmful to us? Lets see. Lets look what Jesus would say about war. Here it is. What would Jesus say about war? "Blessed are the peacemakers." Not "cheese makers!" "Peacemakers!" Surely if we put a bunch of diplomatic geniuses in a room and lock the door, they can come up with a way to world peace. If we can figure out how to go to the moon, surely we can figure out a way to world peace. A way that does not invoke those two very un-Biblical words, "Just war."

4. The uninsured

Need more proof that lifting up Jesus' name, but not his words and deeds, is harmful to us? Let's now look at what Jesus would say about the poor, who comprise most of those with no health insurance. Here it is. "Blessed are the poor." And, "What you do for the least of these you do also for me." And Jesus' brother James writes, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, keep warm, and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily need, what is the good of that?" In today's scripture, in a voice from heaven, God tells us to listen to Jesus. I think that is the thrust of today's lesson: Listen to Jesus. Jesus and his brother James tell us rather starkly that faith without supporting deeds is as detached as Marie Antoinette's famous line, "Let them eat cake." I do not think it is appropriate for a pastor to tell you who to vote for on Super Tuesday. But I do think it is appropriate to tell you that God cares deeply for the 47 million uninsured in our country, most of whom are children. I was stunned, but pleased this week, to learn the AMA now supports mandatory universal health insurance. Would Jesus say, "Let them eat cake?" I don't think so.

Conclusion

Pigs, unruly children, and paradigm shifts. A telescopic view of an elephant, and a triune view of God. Lifting up not just Jesus' name, but also his words and deeds. Powell did this. Ed Whitaker, who we ordain and install as an elder today, will do this. Weiling Xiong, who becomes a partner in our church today by affirmation of Jesus as her Lord and Savior, will do this. So can we. All glory be to God. Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...