

March 3, 2019

Luke 9: 28-43a

Rev. Larry C. Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Time for a Change”

Do you know about Paint Night? This has nothing to do with ladders, buckets, roller pans, or the walls of a room. Paint Night is the event that took place in our Fellowship Hall last Monday when 30 some women gathered to create beautiful pieces of art. Paint Night brought together those who wanted to learn the art of painting with a teacher who instructed them in techniques and style. The instructor provided an example and then guided the group in re-creating the sample image on their own piece of canvas. The results are quite lovely. I've got the original painting, the model image, with me today. As you can see, it's a painting of a vase filled with a bouquet of beautiful flowers. Now, here's a picture of the group from Paint Night, each one displaying their own version of the original. They all did a fantastic job, and I know they had a lot of fun being together and creating their masterpieces. I'm not sure how much of the detail you can see but I notice something obvious about the results. Not one of the paintings looks exactly like another. Each artist brought her individual touch to her work. Keep this in mind, the painters were looking at the same image but what they saw and what their canvas captured is as different and unique as they are to each other. Isn't it interesting that we can look at the same thing and interpret what we see in our own way, often in extraordinarily varied ways.

In the worship life of the church this is the day we call *The Transfiguration of Christ*. The focus is the story we've heard from Luke's Gospel, when Jesus took a trio of disciple-leaders to the top of a mountain and there a vision transformed him by way of brilliant light, filling the place with the glory of God. Peter, John and James are the three disciples who were there and how they interpreted what they saw was not exactly what God intended. Unlike a two dimensional or flat image on a canvas, the gospel gives us a multi-dimensional perspective as to who Jesus is. The mountaintop vision brought Moses, the great law giver in faith history, and Elijah, the great prophet of the people, together with Jesus. Luke says they are talking about his departure, a clear reference to the cross which for Jesus was his exodus from this world and into the resurrected life God was preparing for him. It would seem the disciples did not fully grasp what they were seeing. Some might say their interpretation was too shallow but we have the opportunity to go deeper this morning. Why does the vision include Moses and Elijah? Remember, they are on the mountaintop. This is the place of revelation in the bible. And so, what is revealed? Moses and Elijah are with Jesus, and talking with him about the cross, to show the consistent plan of God from the beginning. In other words, the whole history of faith tells the story of God's saving love which is most fully known in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. On the mountain, his face and clothing shine because Jesus is filled with God's presence, a holy countenance that transforms every darkness into light. Peter and John and James see what is taking place but they interpret it differently. They think it's a moment to capture in time, an experience to preserve so the memory of it will not change. Peter says, "Let's build three booths here. Let's construct memorial tents. Let's capture this moment and preserve this experience, so we can keep it and protect it just as it is." To this response of the disciples, God says, "Be quiet. Listen to my son. Listen to the words of the Christ." It seems the disciples were part of the moment but they didn't see the big picture. They witnessed the glory but they missed it's meaning. They saw the light in Jesus but they failed to see how that light was given so that it would shine through them and into the world.

Last weekend much of our world and many United Methodists were watching the special session of The General Conference of the church that met in St. Louis. The purpose of the conference was to seek a way forward regarding issues of human sexuality, issues that have long divided and preoccupied our denomination. I know not everyone here is fully aware of what this conference was about or what the impact of the decisions made there will mean but the events are significant enough to warrant our reflection this morning. What the General Conference decided is not the way forward for which many had hoped. As you may know or have read, the bishops of the church endorsed a proposal called *The One Church Plan*. This plan acknowledged the deeply divided way people in the church think about the ordination of gay persons and the marriage of same sex individuals. *The One Church Plan* sought to provide a way forward that would hold the global nature of our church together while making space to acknowledge the cultural and theological differences that impact the way we are the church, in all its varied expressions and in many different settings. The conference said "No" to this *One Church Plan* and retained the traditional restrictions around ordination and marriage. Since then, some United Methodists claim this as a victory, while others feel not only loss but great pain. Speaking personally, I am disappointed in the result. In a communication I sent to our congregation prior to the start of the conference, I stated that, for me, any position of the church that grows the reality of love and grace in the world feels to be faithful and true to what God intends. Instead, the action of the conference to keep things as they are means the deep divide among us continues and the painful impact remains, not only in the LGBTQ community but for many others who love the church. I do not think

for a moment that the representatives at the conference do not love God. I think they, like all of us, see the light that is in Jesus, but we interpret that light differently. I personally believe that, as a denomination, we've come up short in experiencing how the light of Christ is seeking to fill us and shine through us into the world.

I turn back to our gospel reading for today which speaks with great relevance to the matters before us. Luke wants us to know that seeing the light isn't about marking a moment in time to keep things just as they are. The light on the mountaintop connects to Christ's light in the world. For this reason, the gospel brackets the Transfiguration of Christ with two other stories about Jesus that help us evaluate what we see. Step back with me to see the wider picture. First, and just prior to the mountain, Jesus teaches his disciples about the reality of the cross. Jesus describes what the experience of the cross will look like for him and then he says all of us who follow him must pick up our crosses, too. The path of discipleship isn't about doctrine or institutional action. Following the path of Jesus is about carrying the weight of sacrificial love, and while this may be a burden at times it is the source of God's eternal blessing for all of creation. The light on the mountain only makes sense within the glory of the cross. Secondly, right after the mountain experience, Jesus moves back down into the world with the disciples. Immediately, Jesus is confronted by a father whose son is possessed by a demon. This condition is so dire the boy is constantly wracked with emotional torment and physical pain. In the presence of Jesus, the demon is cast out and, in what is a beautiful example of what Jesus can do, Luke says he "gave the boy back to his father." That is the moment of real healing. The light on the mountain only makes sense within the healing power of Christ. The light in Jesus not only heals the boy's body but restores a relationship that becomes, once more, what God intends.

Yesterday, our bishop, Gregory Palmer, offered a session that provides some first steps in responding to the action of The General Conference. The bishop said that anyone on planet earth surely recognizes the deep pain and fracture within the United Methodist Church. Our bishop also encouraged us to not lose sight of the greater mission of all Christians, to share Christ for the transformation of the world. I believe this is our opportunity at Powell United Methodist Church, to be renewed in our mission, to respond to the reality of God by sharing Christ's love with everyone. To those who disagree with me on the issues of the day, God loves you. To those who see it in a way similar as I do, God loves you. To all in the church, whatever we see in Jesus, may we know that the light in him shines through the cross and the cross is God's redemptive love for all persons. Like for the boy who was healed, the light in Jesus casts out any counter power that seeks to break us down or pull us apart. That day at the foot of the mountain Jesus gave the boy back to his father. Jesus is working to do the same for us, to give us back to one another, to heal our brokenness, that we will be in relationship with each other, as God intends.

Finally, the light seen in Jesus on the mountain isn't so much about him being changed as it is the change God is working in us. God will not leave me just as I am. God will not leave you just as you are. God will not leave the United Methodist Church as it is but by the light of Christ will continue to change each of our hearts. This is our hope, the same hope the Apostle Paul revealed when he wrote, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8: 38-39)