

In Christian churches around the world, today is known as Transfiguration Sunday - the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent. Millions of people who hear scripture today will hear the story of Jesus hiking up the mountain with Peter, James, and John. They will hear how Jesus was transfigured right before their eyes and how his clothes became whiter than any amount of Clorox could achieve. They will hear how Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus, how Peter desired to mark the occasion by building three dwellings one for each of them, how the voice of God came from a cloud saying, "This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him." It is an awe-inspiring story. But it isn't the whole story.

The story of the Transfiguration is usually told as a stand-alone event without the context of what precedes it or what happens afterward. In Matthew's gospel, the story of the Transfiguration is preceded by two very important events that provide important background for the events that unfold on top of the mountain. First Peter proclaims that Jesus is the messiah, the anointed one. He is the first person to do so. But when Jesus follows Peter's testimony by describing how his ministry and his identity as the Messiah will mean rejection, suffering and death, Peter can't believe what he is hearing. This is not what Peter expected and certainly not how he envisioned the future of his Rabbi, the Son of God. Rev. Gord Waldie writes, "Without that context the story becomes a story of the Glorious One, but loses the reminder that glory comes through struggle and suffering — which appears to be the lesson that Peter (and the rest, and us) needs to learn..."<sup>1</sup>

This news is so upsetting to Peter that he has the audacity to take Jesus aside and rebuke him. The Greek word that is translated in this text as "rebuke" is the same word that is used to refer to silencing demons. Jesus' statement that by living into his calling as the messiah means that he will be killed sounds so crazy to Peter, he seems to think Jesus needs an exorcism.

I think Peter's misunderstanding of the life of the messiah is reflected in a mindset that is prevalent in many current Christian communities. It is the belief that if someone is faithful and prays hard enough and tithes the right amount to the church, that their life will be prosperous and pain-free. It is the belief that if someone's life *isn't* going well, it must be the result of some divine punishment for not being faithful enough. We see not only in the life of Jesus but also the eventual persecution and martyrdom of many of the followers of Jesus that this simply isn't the case. It is a fact of life that even the most selfless and faithful human beings are subject to suffering at the hands of other humans. This fact, however, can lead people to the other extreme – the belief that

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary "Which Way to Glory" posted on <http://revgalblogpals.org/2016/02/02/narrative-lectionary-leanings-which-way-to-glory-edition-mark-827-98/>

all suffering is purposeful and meaningful and part of God's divine plan. We should not read this text and conclude that if someone is suffering that their pain is divinely ordained.

Additionally, some Christians take on the identity of the persecuted faithful and see persecution where it doesn't exist. They read texts like this and believe that suffering and persecution is what it means to be a Christian and therefore interpret disagreement and resistance as persecution. Being a Christian in 21<sup>st</sup> century America is not a life and death proposition. Christians in this country are not suffering as a result of their Christian identity. The disciples lived in a very different time and place. They made many sacrifices including losing their lives in order to proclaim the message of Jesus. Many even were handed over for punishment by members of their own families. Jesus' words of taking up one's cross is an attempt to prepare them for this reality. But this is no longer our reality, at least not here in Brainerd, Minnesota. So what does it mean for us in this time and place?

Raquel Lettsome writes "Jesus commands [the disciples] to "deny themselves" and "take up the cross." In other words, they must not allow society to dictate their actions or allow societal standards to determine their sense of self-worth."<sup>2</sup> This is the modern call to Christians - to not allow our actions to be determined by what is popular, to challenge the status quo, to seek justice for the oppressed, and to be unafraid to claim these actions as part of our Christian faith. We know that living fully into our Christianity may not be the easiest path or one that is free of pain and anguish, and yet, the possibility of suffering is not a good enough reason to give up. Being a Christian in Brainerd, Minnesota in 2019 is not likely to get you killed. We are not likely to experience suffering simply because of our Christian identity. However, as Christians who believe that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people are made in the image of God and are equally worthy of the kin-dom of God as cisgender, heterosexual people, it is important for us to be loud and public about it, especially those of us who are cisgender and heterosexual, even though that still seems to be met with derision and ridicule. As someone who has only lived here for 4 years, I am still frequently surprised how pervasive the prejudice against LGBTQ people in this area. And in the wake of the United Methodist Church General Conference, our testimony of affirming people of all genders and orientations as beloved of God is more important than ever.

I wasn't originally going to go this direction with the sermon, but sometimes the Holy Spirit gets really insistent and I don't feel like any other direction is appropriate. As you may have heard in the news or through social media or friends, a special session of the United Methodist General Conference convened last week to vote on a way forward

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<sup>2</sup> Raquel Lettsome from [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2580](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2580)

for the global church. In 1972, the official position of the church has been that while they believe “homosexuals” (the term the church uses to mean all LGBTQ people) have sacred worth and are deserving of human and civil rights, they do not “condone the practice of homosexuality and consider the practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”<sup>3</sup> Every general conference since the adoption of this position has included debate and disagreement about it. The conflict reached a boiling point in 2016 and the Bishops were tasked with finding a way forward. The result was a plan called the One Church Plan which looked a lot like the way the United Church of Christ currently operates. Each clergy person, each church, and each regional body would be empowered to decide how to function based on their own theological understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity. It would be up to each clergy person and each church if they wanted to perform or host same-sex weddings. It would be up to each conference to decide if they would ordain LGBTQ clergy. This solution had the support of 2/3 of the bishops, but a different plan was passed by the body. The “Traditionalist” plan doubled down on the existing language by adding required consequences for clergy and bishops who refuse to follow the Book of Discipline by ordaining LGBTQ clergy, by existing as LGBTQ clergy, or by performing or hosting same sex weddings. There are a lot of complicated reasons for why this plan passed including that the United Methodist Church is a global church and many of the delegates are from countries with very punitive views on sexuality and gender identity, in large part because conservative Christians from the United States exported those views through missionaries and political propaganda.

I bring this up not to brag about how the UCC is so much better. Our denomination still has a long way to go in the affirmation of LGBTQ people. Only 30% of our congregations claim the designation of Open and Affirming. I have friends and colleagues in the UCC who have been turned down for a call or fired from a position because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. We are not perfect. I bring up the situation in the Methodist Church as a reminder that this news is already causing many people profound pain and grief. I realize that some of you listening to my words this morning felt deeply hurt by this decision and by the words that were spoken by delegates during the conference. I bring up the vote in the UMC because this news will likely embolden more discrimination as some will see their beliefs sanctioned by the church. In other places I have lived like Berkeley and Seattle, it was more taboo to proclaim my identity as a Christian than it was to say that I didn't believe there was anything sinful about being what the Methodist Book of Discipline calls a self-avowed, practicing homosexual.” But Brainerd is not Berkeley. And Pine River is not Seattle. And

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom\\_umc6.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_umc6.htm)

so it is even more important to at the very least, not let bigotry and discrimination go unchecked when we encounter it.

It is important to remember that our text today doesn't end with suffering and death. In the words of the Rev. Rob Blankenship "the disciples are still trying to figure out how all of Christ's story fits together. What is he talking about with all of the stuff about the cross? Where is he going and why is he talking about leaving us, etc.? The disciples have no way of knowing what their futures will hold beyond this point, but God has said, "Listen to my Son." Blankenship continues, "I think about the trek back down the mountain following this experience, of the disciples simply following Christ, putting one foot in front of the other. Isn't that what the Christian experience is all about? ...We find God's will for us in the world [when we] listen to Christ, but [we must] also continue putting one foot in front of the other as we follow along. It is only through taking that 'next step' that we will ever know what all God has in store for us and what all he has for us to do in this life. Keep taking that next step."<sup>4</sup>

With James and John and Peter, we too are led up the mountain to witness the transforming power of God in Jesus. The story reminds us that God and God's ways are beyond our understanding. It beckons to make the difficult journey with Jesus. To endure the difficult valleys, to bear witness and seek an end to the suffering of others, to follow our call to love God with all our heart and all our soul and with all our mind and love neighbor as ourselves. And when it all feels like too much, to turn our attention to the awe and wonder of God. To experience our own transformation through our deepening relationship with God and Jesus. This Christian faith is a messy, confusing, difficult, and sometimes unexplainable thing. And yet in the midst of this, are moments of transfiguration, when the light and love of God is poured out upon us, when nothing makes sense, and everything makes sense at the same time. When the valleys of the world seem to disappear, and we are on top of the mountain. May those moments carry us through the valleys, and may we be unafraid to get up and follow.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Blankenship quoted on <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/transfigurationa>