

The event that is at the center of today's Gospel reading, the event we mark and celebrate today, the Transfiguration of Jesus, has historically not been seen as so important by Protestants as it has been by Roman Catholics and Episcopalians, but it would be wrong for us to avoid this incident, wrong for us to shut out what it may have to offer to us in our understanding of the life and ministry and presence of Jesus Christ. It would be wrong to skip over or avoid the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ because it is right there in all three of the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In the spirit of the victory of the Saints in the Superbowl last Sunday the Transfiguration of Jesus is very much a “Who dat?” moment. Who dat?” was exactly the question going through the minds of the disciples as they observed these strange happenings – just exactly who is this Jesus?

I want to suggest today that we need this “Who dat?” incident, this strange story of revelation and dislocation and heightened senses to help us better understand the holy and the secular – both in the sense of what they are and in the sense of how the holy and the secular are connected and intertwined, how the holy and what we call “worldly” or “secular”, affect, balance and even correct each other.

Such a revised understanding and perspective is vital because as a church we care about both what people usually describe as the holy and the secular!

- We are being called to have a mind for God and a mind for our neighbor;
- We are asked to have a heart for God and a heart for all God's children;
- We are to allow all that we do and say and hear and receive here in Church, in worship, in prayer and study, to affect, shape, change and alter what we do and who we are the rest of the week - in our attitudes toward others, our care for creation, our ethics in businesses, the way we spend our money, the things we do in our social time.
- We are to be holy by influencing, caring about, changing the concrete hurts, the pains, losses and needs of all God's children.

Truth is this Transfiguration incident, confirms that the holy and secular overlap and intrude one into the other – that God is both a thoroughly holy and a thoroughly secular God – that God cares for the reality of our everyday lives out of the totality of who God is! God is not bound by nor limited to the what we might call “holy” God is just as concerned about the “everyday”, what is earthly and practical.

Although she would never have claimed to be a theologian my own mom had something very profound to say on this very subject. When she encountered someone who could quote the Bible or seemed too good to be true or was always happy to be seen by everyone else at church doing good, I would sometimes hear her say, “They are too heavenly minded to be any earthly use!” The Transfiguration of our Lord is a corrective to such a disparity, asking us, inviting us, promising us to best connect the holy to the secular, the secular to the holy, connecting Sunday to Monday, Worship to Work, Communion to Community, Prayer to Practice – just as Jesus did, a choice that eventually cost Jesus His life. The experience of Transfiguration for Jesus invites us to be just heavenly minded enough such that we can make an earthly difference.

## Sermon: Disorderly Conduct

I want to move forward now in this sermon by sharing a story with you. It is a story about a Jewish rabbi! As you will quickly hear this particular Jewish Rabbi is not the one about whom we talk most often here in Church – it is not a story about Jesus but about a rabbi who gave a special gift—a rather surprising gift—to five old monks. It is a story that connects back to the notes on the piano that concluded Youth Sunday last week... listen, remember, rejoice.....

Once upon a time there was a monastery that fell upon hard times. It had once been a thriving place—full of faithful monks, devoted to worship, study, and prayer and to work in their fields; it had been a community of faith and prayer that drew others into its life and encouraged service to others, especially those in need. But now there remained only the abbot and four other monks, all quite elderly, no longer as sprightly as they once had been, and seemingly little prospect of being able to return to the days of vibrant and lively ministry.

In the forest, not far from the monastery, there was a little hut that was used by a rabbi as a place of retreat. None of the monks had ever spoken with the rabbi, but they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hut. They would whisper to one another, “The rabbi is in the woods.”

Now the abbot realized that the monastery would cease to exist, unless something changed soon. Not knowing what else to do, he decided to pay a visit to the rabbi. Perhaps, he thought, the rabbi may have some piece of advice. The rabbi graciously welcomed the abbot. Nonetheless, when the abbot told the rabbi why he was there, the rabbi could only empathize with him. “I know how it is,” the rabbi exclaimed. “The Spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.” For a time the abbot and the rabbi wept together, quietly and softly.

When it was time for the abbot to leave, the abbot said, “It is wonderful to meet you after all these years, but I had hoped you would have some piece of advice to help save the monastery.” “I am sorry,” said the rabbi, “I have no advice. The only thing I have to say is that the Messiah is among you.” (Do you remember last week? “Singing.... What if God is one of us....”)

Upon the abbot’s return, his fellow monks asked, “What did the rabbi say?” “He had no advice,” said the abbot. “But as I was leaving, he did say something very puzzling. He said that the Messiah is among us.” (Singing...What if God...”)

In the following days and weeks and months, the monks pondered the meaning of the rabbi’s words. The oldest monk wondered, “Could one of us really be the Messiah? Had the Christ come again? Which one of us could it possibly be? Did the rabbi mean the abbot? He has been a faithful leader for many years. Or did he mean Brother Thomas? Brother Thomas was an exemplary holy man. It could not be Brother Elrod, could it? Elrod gets so cross at times. And yet Brother Elrod almost always turns out to be right about things—about important things—matters of faith. Brother Phillip was certainly out of the question—too passive—a real nobody. But who was there whenever anyone needed somebody? Maybe Brother Phillip is the Messiah. Surely I am not the Messiah, thought the oldest monk, I am too ordinary—too old—too worn out—but who knows?”

Although it was too wonderful to believe that one of them was truly the Messiah, just in case, they began to treat each other with extraordinary respect. Without being consciously aware of it, the

occasional Sunday afternoon visitors began to sense a spirit of extraordinary respect among the monks. Even in its rundown condition, the monastery was still a nice place for a Sunday afternoon picnic and for some quiet time in the chapel. People began feeling compelled to return more and more frequently to pray and to picnic. They brought their friends, and then their friends brought their friends. Some of the young men who visited talked more and more to the old monks. Some of them decided to stay. Before long the monastery was thriving once again—a vibrant center of faith and prayer. Before the oldest monk died, his last words were a prayer of thanks for the rabbi's gift. How thankful he was that the rabbi had taught them to respect one another once again, and nurture in each other the gifts of faith and prayer and service and thereby to receive all over again the blessing of the Spirit and the opportunity to sustain a community of grace and love in ministry together.

As for the monks in this story so it is for us! Jesus Christ, God's love incarnate, is the great mystery that always remains a mystery to us –

Even though some of us have devoted many years to understanding the mystery of God's love, it still remains a mystery, a stubborn mystery;

Even though we have read a lot, even though we have had great Sunday School teachers, even though we have many great examples of faith to follow and emulate;

Even though we have heard many compelling sermons, even though we have really, really tried our best, God goes before us still, a mystery!

There are times when we begin to imagine that we are getting closer to understanding God, but just then we become mystified all over again when we come face to face with who God is and all God has done and is doing. At such moments we re-discover that to be a Christian is to be in love with the grand mystery who is God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and that the mystery of God is finally not a problem to be solved, not a question to be answered, but a relationship to be enjoyed.

To all of you listening gathered here at Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church this morning, to all of you who join us through CN2, to all of you who read this sermon on our church website, to all of you who hear about this sermon from someone who passed it on to you, I want to make this appeal – for God's sake, for the sake of Jesus Christ, for your own sake: Rejoice! Rejoice in the mystery of God! Let your relationship with God, the God who greets us and meets in Jesus Christ, become the center of your life and your living! Let this relationship, your relationship with and from and to God be your chief joy and your lasting concern! In your life enjoy God as you share God's love in every time and place and circumstance!

In the time of Jesus, what we might call “the holiness party,” the scribes and the Pharisees, drew the circle of perceived holiness so tight that most people were excluded. They focused on outward observance of even the smallest regulation and by doing so they missed the heart of God's Law – goodness, mercy, justice, care for the weak and the vulnerable. They drew the circle so tight that even Jesus was excluded! Time and again in the Gospels we read of ways in which Jesus stepped outside of the tightly drawn holiness circle to mingle and mix with “tax collectors and sinners”, calling them, calling all, to faith and fellowship with God, and to a new way of living and being, devoted to the purposes of God, the purposes of love, and giving and serving, and following. But as we know the holy

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folks, those of whom my mum would have said “They are too heavenly minded to be any earthly use!”, they refused Jesus invitation to enjoy God and as a result they completely missed what God was and is doing in Jesus Christ. They preferred to play it safe, to stand back, to sit on their hands, releasing them only long enough to point out all the mistakes Jesus was making. Eventually they so misunderstood what was going on and who Jesus was that they shut Jesus up, closed Jesus down, sat Jesus down, froze Jesus out... or so they thought....

The call and invitation from the Transfigured Jesus to engage in some disorderly conduct is what lies behind Sydney Carter’s hymn, “The Lord of the Dance.” We will end our Service with that hymn today to affirm that we know and we rejoice to know that we have a call from our Lord, that even now our Lord is inviting all of us onto the floor to participate in the dance of faith, inviting us to enjoy God even as we live and grow and share and celebrate the love that God has for all people.

And so today we will sing this hymn, we will mean this hymn, but then the organ will fall silent, the beat will end, the music will cease and we will be sent out to live and proclaim and share this love that the Holy God has for this broken world. We are always tempted to do what Peter suggested following the “Who dat?” moment on the Mountain of the Transfiguration, we could say, Lord let us stay a while on our mountain top high, like not wanting church camp or our week at Montreat to ever end. Like wanting to stick a plaque on an item of furniture or memorialize some golden age. But no! The dance calls us back down into the valley where people suffer from unholy diseases and injustice.

My friends and partners in the dance Jesus is and will lead us, forward and onward in the dance that we might rejoice in God and rejoice in serving all God’s children – the coming together of the holy and the secular, heaven and earth, the very work, the very dance, the very disorderly conduct of Jesus and the disorderly conduct of all the followers of Jesus.

Jesus will and is opening us to God, opening us to one another, opening us to all people such that we can share in a life changing encounter with the living, loving God, who because of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus is forever mixed up in and committed to the life of this world. So dance! Sing! Share! Live! Freedom, faith, hope, peace, love – the God experience - your disorderly conduct. Amen.