



“LOVE AND LOSING”

SCRIPTURE: Mark 9

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

February 14, 2021, Transfiguration Sunday

The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Last night was an ethereal, mystical night--a fog hovered over these mountains with primal stillness. A blanket of celestial mist. You know how clouds can roll in here and then just sink down as if to rest for a while.

I know this because our old dog Buck (soon to be 16 years old) woke me up with a desperate need to go outside in the middle of the night.

I have not been sleeping much lately--these are intense times at our house as we work each day to try and manage John's pain while we wait for a diagnosis and a way forward for some kind of treatment.

And it's Saturday night on a night when I am preaching the next day--the week after I finally leaned into the possibility that haunted me for years of sermon writing--that I would come to church time and not have a sermon. So, last week that happened, and the Spirit showed up, God was on time. It was a mountain top experience and it was a transformation--my body was exhausted after that. I felt like we had all been to a new place together.

Now here we are, another Sunday after that experience--and my fingers were dancing across the keyboard and my eyes were getting heavy with sleep, so I surrendered and I had finally fallen asleep--into a deep, much needed sleep when Buck started barking.

At first I tried to quiet him--but he really needed to go out. So we went. And that's when I got to see the celestial cloak that enveloped the mountains and the valleys.

So quiet, so massive, so complete. And yet, so ephemeral--transitory, impermanent. If I hadn't gotten up at that moment, I would not have seen it, even as I was enveloped in it in my sleep without even knowing.

Transfiguration hovers, blankets, moves in and through--vapory and massive, mysterious and disruptive.

And in a mundane moment we stumble into a liminal space that speaks to us of eternal possibilities and Holy imagination.

That's what Transfiguration asks of us--to let a moment speak to us of eternal possibilities and Holy imagination.

And so the Spirit led me to imagine--and to wonder how we can imagine with more courage together.

What if this city and county and country are being transfigured?

What if we are being transfigured?

What if the ancestors are coming close and calling us to imagine healing in ways they hadn't or wouldn't or couldn't?

Thursday night with Tema Okun (OAKIN) and Tami Forte-Logan was transformative. Saturday afternoon with Faith 4 Justice and more than 150 people gathered on Zoom to explore revolutionary love and how to cast out the demon of white supremacy in our churches was transformative.

People were connecting in ways they hadn't known before.

Truths spoken, imaginations expanded.

Just like Peter, John, and James, we struggle to linger in those liminal, thin spaces for long--our brains want to put things in categories--our brains want to figure out a way to put an experience in our already existing filing system.

But Transfiguration asks us into a very different kind of moment than analysis and making sense of things.

The invitation of Transfiguration is to be present and absorb something that we cannot fully comprehend and to let that experience bring us closer to God.

It struck me in the middle of the night that Transfiguration is actually an embodied antithesis of trauma.

Trauma's overwhelm and disruption enters our bodies and scrambles our filing systems in ways that diminish, in ways that harm, in ways that try to arrest us so that we can just stay alive. We don't fully absorb the experience consciously when it is traumatic--that's one of the ways our bodies protect us and try to preserve our existence.

So, instead of realizing the full force of trauma in the moment, it settles into our bones, our muscles, our guts, our organs, our blood flow, our reactions. And without support, without acknowledgment, without a way to metabolize the trauma through our bodies, that trauma can become entrenched in us so much that it changes our personalities, our family systems, our communities, even our cultures.

Trauma breaks relationship and diminishes our capacity to love and to be loved.

Transfiguration also comes into our bodies with a startling magnitude, and overrides our normal mode of operation. It is not there to do harm, but to heal. Transfiguration changes us forever--but not by diminishing--it is an amplification of possibilities, an expansion of love's power to transform.

Transfiguration doesn't want us to just survive, it calls us to be sanctified--to be transformed in a cellular way--to integrate the promises of our ancestors into a new way of being God's people--that breaks free of walls, buildings, systems, cultures, spaces we try to say we own.

I am not sure it has ever struck me so clearly why the rhythm of the liturgical year brings us to **the mountain top of Transfiguration right before we enter the wilderness of Lent.**

God calls us to the mountain to show us the layers of mystery that are happening all the time--the hovering, mystical power of healing that comes close even in our sleepy ways of accepting the status quo.

We are called to the mountain top to be enveloped in the awe of God with us--moving people and histories and habits and trauma into new ways of being.

And we come down from that mountain--that experience that we don't fully know how to process or metabolize, and we mark ourselves with ashes just a few days later to remember together that we are dust.

We move from a brush with God to a brush with death.

Lent is the wilderness that envelopes us like the clouds and strips us of the false idols and mentalities that we cling to--clearing space for new life, for unexpected rebirth.

In both Transfiguration and trauma, we get a visceral brush with the true nature of love--which is much more about losing than we want to admit.

The whole binary we're taught between winning and losing is exploded by the very nature of love.

Winning and avoiding losing are the addictive drugs of white inferiority.

Whiteness maintains its charade of superiority by telling us that winning is good and losing is bad. Whiteness is constantly trying to prove it's superiority by claiming trophies of its own making--a crazy game of gotcha that only serves to prop up a lie.

Superiority itself is a lie! Superiority itself is a lie.

And the myth superiority teaches fear of inferiority.

And the desire to be superior is the opposite of love!

One of the most entrenched tools of superiority is the mythology of winning and losing, the obsession with competition as they best means to cultivate thriving.

The kind of losing that love asks of us is Holy. It's not a scoreboard, it's a sacred trust. Love yearns for trustworthy connections. Love yearns to lose the fear of what those trustworthy connections may cost us.

Bringing Transfiguration, trauma, and Holy Imagination together in this moment for us to let God's love continue its mighty healing work in us.

Holy Imagination:

Tell you the story of a church that made an idol of whiteness rather than saying yes to being transfigured. This church may exist somewhere. It is the combination of things I have been told by colleagues about particular churches. I am weaving them together into one church.

Listen carefully because we will use our Holy Imagination to tell a different story together in a minute.

There was a church, we'll call it the Presbyterian Church of Generic Community (PCGC). It was known for its beautiful building, which was a huge part of its identity. It took pride in all the trappings of a certain way of worshipping--wearing robes, sitting in pews, sitting quietly and still, with bulletins in hand.

Then the COVID pandemic hit and worshipping this way was no longer an option--so everyone at PCGC just hunkered down and held their collective breath until they could get back to "normal."

Any touch of church online they had was pre-recorded. Navigating live technology was too complicated and they wanted to use their resources for their building and not for technological support.

The Session and congregation insisted that the minister still be in the pulpit and wear a robe to preach in the videos because that made them feel connected to normalcy. They demanded that the choir still gather and sing in the sanctuary. They could record themselves while standing 6 feet apart and masked in the

sanctuary. Even if it meant people getting sick, and even some people dying, they weren't going to let go of the way sacred music was supposed to be.

When new ways of connecting online emerged, most people in the church refused to stretch--they took their discomfort and lack of competency as a sign that they needed to recoil, avoid, refuse, reject. And they hunkered down and waited some more.

Through the difficult season of the pandemic PCGC demanded that they be comforted by the familiar. They demanded that they hold on tight until they could come back into their beloved space again.

They secretly struggled and felt lonely and sad, but they didn't want anyone to know that they were struggling. So instead of grieving together, they complained together about how they would do things differently if they were in charge.

Instead of reaching out to each other and stretching into new ways of being community, they closed ranks and created small alliances of people jockeying for influence in how and when the church would reopen.

PCGC's Session decided this was no time to welcome new members because they couldn't have their new member classes and they couldn't really know these people without being in the room with them like they always had.

The PCGC staff burned out from all the complaining and demanding. Several got COVID because the Session demanded they go back to face to face worship and create a reservation system. And the church didn't feel it was right for them to work from home. They wanted to make sure they were working like they should be.

And even though they asked people not to come to the limited seating worship if they didn't feel well or had been exposed to COVID, some people thought those rules didn't apply to them so they came to church anyway. They had some people in the congregation die of COVID, but no one ever named that. It remained an unspoken trauma that no one ever acknowledged.

When they got back into the building things didn't feel the same. Everything in the world around them was different, trying to be the way they were before felt empty and awkward. The church languished, its energy drained, staff felt beat up and were looking for a way out. Some left the ministry all together.

Just a few years after COVID ended, the church ended up closing its doors forever. On the congregation's last Sunday they traced their demise back to the tragedy of the pandemic and all it took from them. They blamed the pastor and the community and the other church members who left. They blamed everyone and everything else for what was happening. And they saw their refusal to yield their old ways as a sign of their strength and their faith. PCGC died on the mountain of status quo, and one right way, either/or thinking, perfectionism, and superiority. On the scoreboard of white supremacy, they actually thought they won.

Holy Imagination:

Use the chat to tell a different story. Let this story be about GCPC.

What have we been willing to lay down? What new ways have we embraced?
How is our story different from the story of PCGC so far?

(people write things in the chat)

Are we able to imagine a new way of being church together when COVID 19 no longer is a threat?

Use your Holy Imagination--what could look different? What could feel different?
Can you catch a glimpse of how the new muscles we've learned to use are equipping us for a new future together?

(people put things in the chat)

PCGC's story ended with the church thinking it had won because it championed the status quo, and normalcy.

Can we imagine together how GCPC's story might end? Where will GCPC be in a few years from now?

(people share in the chat)

Losing is not the opposite of winning.

Losing is the way love expresses itself most powerfully--laying down what we cling to because we know that God is love. Losing our fear of change because we know that the life of faith is a life of transformation, and that our God is a God of Transfiguration.

What if the future looks like GCPC being a community where white people hold other white people accountable?

What if the future looks like a community where collective liberation is the only love language we are fluent in?

Communion--remember before COVID19 was a word we even knew, God was already doing a work in and through us--we were being transformed in the way we celebrated Eucharist--in the ways we embodied the promise of the Lord's Heavenly Banquet table for all people--we were changing the way we moved and arranged our bodies in the sanctuary. We were stretching and feeling and finding ourselves experiencing things we hadn't even known we needed. And we were beginning to feel the ways that Eucharist is connected to the healing we need from white supremacy culture within ourselves and within our community.

COVID 19 didn't interrupt that work God is doing--it deepened it, it expanded it. It changed what and how we imagine a better world together.

Transfiguration is about saying goodbye to a former way and metabolizing the past, metabolizing trauma into a new future.

Transfiguration is not about Jesus' superiority--it is about Jesus' proximity to God. Jesus' did not weaponize his proximity to God to set himself apart or to be better than or to claim superiority or dominance.

Transfiguration is about the power to imagine and to embody a world healed from its trauma, from the brutality of delusion and pride and self-hatred.

Clouds hovering over these mountains in the wee hours of Transfiguration Sunday--I could see our beloved community climbing a mountain of transformation together.

Not knowing exactly what we will see and feel--but knowing that the ancestors are calling us there, calling us right here--their pain, their promise lives in us--and when God hovers over our broken and beating hearts--we can finally lose ourselves to love ourselves--and love ourselves for the liberation of all people.

Thanks be to God.