

Wondrous Depth

I Corinthians 13:8-13; Mark 9:2-9

Last Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 14) 2021

Transfiguration Sunday

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The wondrous depth of your utterances, whose surface may indeed be flattering to the childish, but the wondrous depth, my God, the wondrous depth! It gives one a shudder to peer into it – a shudder of awe, and a tremor of love.

Augustine, *Confessions*, 12. 14. 17

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John, the disciples' inner circle, up on a mountain. And there Jesus is Transfigured – his face, his body, his clothes grow bright, not because of some reflection, but by some inner light shining forth from who he is. Jesus, the Christ, is the Light that is the source of all other lights. He is the Word made flesh that begat all other words. He is the totality of love incarnate. He is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and End. For one brief, bright shining moment, these three disciples see the “wondrous depth” of who Jesus truly is – the *mira profunitas*, the wondrous depth.

And if that was not enough, suddenly Moses and Elijah show up and start having a conversation with Jesus. Moses – the great lawgiver and Elijah – the greatest prophet in conversation with Jesus. Peter interrupts, butts in, “Lord, this is great. Let’s put up three tents and just stay up here – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

As an answer, a massive bright cloud overshadows everything and everyone, and from within the cloud a voice says, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him!” Or “This is my beloved Son; shut-up and listen!”

With that answer, these three disciples look up and everyone is gone except Jesus. And Jesus heads down the mountain, with the awe-struck, slack-jawed disciples running and stumbling trying to keep up.

What have we gotten into with this Jesus? We thought he was just a nice guy, a prophet, who was going to reform things. Or maybe we thought he would come into my heart and save me so I can be in heaven someday. But he is a lot more. He’s the Living Word of God. In the flesh. He’s the beginning and the end. He’s the One in whom all things were created, and all things hold together. He is Love Incarnate. Sometimes we see this Living and Loving God in fragments and glimpses. We see him masked as we are masked. But here on this mountain, this thin place, the Living God has come near in Jesus and we see face to face.

Listen to him.

We are a logocentric people – a people of the word. The Word is to be the center of our lives – the Living Word – Jesus Christ. Listen to him. Listen to the word. We believe that we have the Recorded Word (the Bible); furthermore, we believe in the Proclaimed Word (preaching). We cherish the word, and we listen to the word. We worship, follow and listen to the One, who became, as T.S. Eliot put it, speaking of Christ’s nativity, the “word within a word, unable to speak a word.”

The Word and words are important. We want to listen and pay attention.

Unfortunately, we live in a world of industrialized language, where words are processed like cheese, depleted of nutrients, flattened and packaged, artificially

colored and mass marketed. We are glutted with words, sung, spoken, heard, written, consumed thoughtlessly and then disposed like everything else in our market-driven industrialized world. Our capacity to listen, to pay attention, to notice, to understand, and to be able to discern what's good and what's not, what's true and what's not, is diluted, co-opted, and overwhelmed. We lose the ability to communicate and mean what we say, and to understand what others are saying.

George Orwell had a famous essay in 1946 in which he said, “[The English language] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts” (“Politics and the English Language” George Orwell).

Jewish literary critic George Steiner reflected on what happened to the German language under the Third Reich, “The language was infected not only with...great bestialities. It was called upon to enforce innumerable falsehoods, to persuade the Germans that the war was just and everywhere victorious. As defeat closed in... the lies thickened to a constant snowdrift...”

He went on:

Use a language to conceive, organize, and justify Belsen; use it to make out specifications for gas ovens; use it to dehumanize man during twelve years of calculated bestiality. Something will happen to it... Something of the lies and sadism will settle in the marrow of the language. Imperceptibly at first, like the poisons of radiation sifting silently into the bone. But the cancer will begin, and the deep-set destruction.

- (from *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman*, pp. 100-101)

Wendell Berry observes that the two epidemic illnesses of our time, “the disintegration of communities and the disintegration of persons,” are closely related to the disintegration of language (see *Standing by Words*, p. 14).

We need to be able to mean what we say and say what we say. And we need to be able to discern good from bad, right from wrong, truth from falsehood, and beauty from ugliness. Words are not something to be taken for granted. We must learn to listen.

But there is more.

Here, in a moment, in a microcosm is the work of Christ. The One from Heaven revealed in transfiguration, shining with the light of God, is also incarnate – flesh and blood. Here in the flesh of Jesus Christ, heaven and earth are joined and in so doing are made bright and shining and transformed.

Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” Hopkins, the great Victorian era poet, who was a Jesuit priest, strongly believed and wrote about how we can look at and through nature and persons to the uniqueness of each and every thing; and as each and every thing does what it is meant to do, we can look and see something of the grandeur of God.

This is one reason we read the poets. They show us by words the “dearest freshness deep down things.” Poetry calls us to slow down, notice the details, and listen. And in slowing down, noticing, and listening we begin to glimpse the deep-down things, the wondrous depth.

Augustine said, “The wondrous depth of your utterances, whose surface may indeed be flattering to the childish, but the wondrous depth, my God, the wondrous depth! It gives one a shudder to peer into it – a shudder of awe, and a tremor of

love” (*Confessions*, 12. 14. 17). And though Augustine was specifically referring to Scripture, because of the Living Word, we believe there is a depth of meaning in language. We might not hold a poem to be the same as Scripture, but we do believe that poems help us see and listen for the wondrous depth of God all around us.

Anyone who has taken walks with small children knows that “getting there” is not the point. They stop, squat down. They smell plants, they look at bugs, they chase a butterfly, they pick up a small rock they find interesting and then suddenly drop it as they discover a feather instead. The feather turns out to be so engaging that they want to run back and show it to you. Where you end up might have nothing to do with where you thought you were going and when you get there has little to do with the time you thought it would take.

Walking with small children is good training for reading poetry. And hear me clearly, it is good training for reading Scripture and praying and knowing God. It takes work and time to recover and practice the habits of mind and heart we’re talking about.

William Blake famously put it this way, “To see a World in a Grain of Sand/ And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,/ Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand And Eternity in an hour” (from *Auguries of Innocence*).

To reinforce what I’m saying, the same habits and practices of the mind and heart that allows us to read poetry are the same ones that help us to read Scripture. And they help us to read and see and listen to God’s Creation. Most of all, these same habits and practices are the very ones essential to knowing God.

Knowing God takes time. There is no speed reading of poetry and there is no speed praying or fast worshiping in knowing God. There are no short-cuts. God takes time. That's why the practices of knowing God: prayer, worship, meditation, singing, serving, and so on, have been known as spiritual disciplines. And it is why Lent has been the time the church has traditionally set aside to recover and renew our spiritual disciplines. But the overall goal is not the spiritual discipline. Those are simply means to knowing God.

Listen, pay attention to what else is going on here.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, "Let us have the same mind as Christ Jesus, who, though he was God, did not regard equality with God as something to exploit or hold onto, but emptied himself, becoming a servant..." (Phil. 2:5-6).

In the context of our story this morning, Jesus did not stay on the mountaintop glowing with the Light of the Living God. Being Love Incarnate, Jesus put that aside and headed down the mountain to serve others.

A writer I enjoy who also challenges and teaches me is black womanist, social critic bell hooks. In her new book, *All About Love: New Visions*, she writes, "The word 'love' is most often defined as a noun, yet... we would all love better if we used it as a verb." She goes on to quote Scott Peck from his classic *The Road Less Traveled*, who said love is "the will to extend one's self for the purposes of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." He goes on, "Love is as love does. Love is an act of will – namely, both an intention and an action... We do not have to love. We choose to love" (hooks, p. 4-5).

After the transfiguring light and the conversation with Moses and Elijah, Jesus heads down the mountain taking Peter, James, and John with him. Being love in the flesh, he makes the intentional choice of looking outward for others to serve, and to give of himself.

Love is not instinctive as much as it is learned. Love is not a feeling that just comes upon us. We have to learn how to love and we have to practice, practice, practice love with each other. We love in community, in relation. In the image of the Triune God, who is perfect love and perfect communion, who always looks outward toward each other and beyond to all creation, we learn to love in relationship.

One of the hardest things and most wonderful things at the same time, is being married. Marriage trains us in love and allows us to practice, practice, practice it over and over every day, and sustain it, enhance it, and nurture it so it will grow and grow. As I say in many wedding homilies, we only thought we knew what love was when we got married. After decades of being married to Jane, I now love her more deeply and patiently, truthfully and joyfully, and with her help (and the help of the Holy Spirit through her) I am learning to love you, Austin Heights, more and more.

As Thomas Merton said, “We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone – we find it with another” (quoted by b hooks, p. 224).

Love takes time and effort. Like Jesus on the mountaintop, we cannot just sit and love, but must put it to work with others.

We are getting ready to head into Lent. Here at the mid-point of Mark, Jesus is turning toward Jerusalem and the cross. Lent is us learning to walk with him. But before we start the Lenten journey with Jesus, we are given this focal moment, in which Jesus shows us who he is and who we are called to be and show us what love is and how we can learn to love.

One of the most remarkable and moving stories I've read in a while is from my friend Norman Wirzba who tells about Marguerite Bargankitse, who goes by "Maggy" and who lives in Burundi. She witnessed deeply and profoundly the immense violence in Burundi and Rwanda during the early and mid-1990's. I don't have time to go through her whole story so it must suffice for me to explain that she was raised Christian and was working for the bishop when Tutsis came to the compound to kill Hutus. Maggy was also Tutsi, and many of the approaching Tutsis were people she knew personally, had been in church with them most of her life and they had witnessed each other's baptism. She pleaded for them to not be violent but instead, they stripped her naked, tied her to a chair, and made her watch as they proceeded to slaughter seventy-two children and women right in front of her. I won't go into detail, but it was horrifying and overwhelming, unbelievable and shocking.

Maggy experienced such things more than once and through it all she practiced the radical love of Jesus by taking care of children – wounded and traumatized, maimed and orphaned – loving them in the midst of overwhelming hatred. Maggy witnessed brutality as she went to village after village seeking to care and love the hurting and the dying. At one point, she was so overcome that she could not speak for a month. Doctors said she was totally exhausted and

traumatized by hatred and cruelty. Maggy said, “If I were not a Christian, I would have committed suicide many times over the years.”

What saved Maggy – and this is what I want you to hear – is that she gradually understood that the work of healing is not hers, but God’s. She learned that it was not her responsibility to remake people or change the world. Instead, she is to participate in God’s love, allowing God’s love to flow through her, and that God is the center and the source of whatever strength she had. Her task is not to “save” the world or even the children of Burundi. It is to bear witness to the love of God. Her daily prayer became, “Let me not become an obstacle to the miracles You will perform today” (see Norman Wirzba, *Way of Love: Recovering the Heart of Christianity*, pp. 184-196).

Austin Heights our vocation is not to save the world or even save Nacogdoches County. Even here we are overwhelmed and shocked by racism and hatred, heartache and suffering. The Powers of Death are counting on us giving up or giving in and becoming hate-filled and angry.

We are called to otherwise. Let us listen to Jesus, immerse ourselves in the wondrous depth of the Living and Loving God.

The great Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemmann, said, “There must be someone to stand in the world’s center, and to discern, to see it again as full of divine riches, as the cup full of life and joy, as beauty and wisdom, and to thank God for it” (*For the Life of the World*).

We are called to be that someone.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.