

Transfiguration, Photosynthesis, and Us

Preached by the Rev. Gordon Chastain on the Feast of the Transfiguration, 8 August 2010, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: Exodus 34:29-35, Psalm 99, II Peter 1:13-21, Luke 9:28-36.

Last Friday, August 6, was the Feast of Transfiguration in the Church calendar. I asked that we observe it again today because I have come to believe that we too easily let the story of the Transfiguration slip by us, since only rarely does August 6th fall on a Sunday. It is true that we also read the story on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany every year. But even once a year doesn't seem quite enough to me any more.

This was not always true for me. Until fairly recently I thought of the story, if I thought of it all, as mildly interesting because it was mysterious. The story is that Jesus took his inner circle of friends up on a mountain to pray. While there they had some kind of experience of glory that is not very well explained but involved dazzling light and the appearance of two dead people, Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah just happen to be two people in the Old Testament who are said to have seen God on top of mountains. So what happened on this mountain with Jesus? Was it a vision? Or group hallucination? Or something that got stretched in the telling and re-telling long afterward? If we approach the story with those questions, we will get nowhere. But there is another kind of question that will get us somewhere—namely, what does this story have to do with us more or less normal people who do not regularly see God or dead people? Or to put it another way: Who is it who gets transfigured, transformed? Who gets the vision of glory? Is the Transfiguration a story about Jesus or about us?

Our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters have an answer. They actually had a big controversy about the Transfiguration about 600 years ago, a bigger and more bitter fight than any of our current difficulties in the Anglican Communion. The way they asked the question was like this: Is the Transfiguration experience possible for everyday Christians right here on earth; could it

actually the hope and goal of the Christian life; or is it only a promise for heaven? And after struggle, the Orthodox answer is a strong “yes”—we can and do share in the Transfiguration experience in this world.

A kind of transfiguration, a transformation through light, does happen in the natural world all around us. I'm thinking of photosynthesis. Here is a description, almost a recipe for photosynthesis, I found this week:

In the presence of light add six molecules of water to six molecules of carbon dioxide. The result is one molecule of sugar and six molecules of oxygen. The process works something like this: Photons (light energy) from the Sun strike chlorophyll. As it absorbs the light, the chlorophyll, using electrons from water, is excited to a higher energy state. The water splits, releasing oxygen. The energy from the interaction is converted to... a sugar which becomes food both for the plant and those who consume the plant. [Judy Cannato, *Radical Amazement*, Sorin Books, Notre Dame, IN, 2006 p. 70.]

It is that transformation through light that makes it possible for you and me to breathe oxygen and have something to eat. If it were not for the transformation of water and carbon dioxide into oxygen and food, we would not be here.

Perhaps some of you remember Lynn Browning from this parish. She is now a sister in the Community of the Transfiguration in Cincinnati. As you might guess from the name, that community is very attached to the Transfiguration story and to making it real in the life of the Church today. Here is one of their prayers:

*Let your light so shine through us, O Christ,
that all we meet may see your face, hear
your voice, and be drawn into your love.*

That sounds to me like a prayer that we might be photosynthesized by the light of Christ,

transforming our human experience into the love of Christ.

Can you imagine that? Our faces becoming the face of Christ, our voices the voice of Christ, our arms outstretched in the embracing love of Christ? Is that too much to ask—even too much to ask of God?

It is precisely what we do ask and what we are given today in Holy Communion. We offer some bread and wine. Bread made by human hands from products of the natural world and wine made by human hands from grapes. Both bread and wine are manufactured from what nature produces. Both are associated with the bad and the good of human life. Bread sustains life. But some of us eat way too much, and others on this planet don't have enough to eat. Wine makes the heart glad, and it also makes drunkenness and despair. At this altar, we pray over those ingredients, that they may be transfigured, photosynthesized by the energizing Spirit of God. Receiving those gifts into our own bodies turns us, we say, into the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ—that means that if Christ is to be seen in Indianapolis in 2010, Christ will be seen right here. Where can Christ be heard? When we speak. Where is the love of Christ? Right here.

I hope you see by now why I wanted us to hear again today the story of the Transfiguration. It is because it *is* our story. It is what we act out Sunday after Sunday at this altar. I'm afraid that much of the time we forget who we are and what we do here. Many of us come to church to get recharged to face another week. Our expectations of church are really fairly limited. We want some inspiration to live a good life and do good. We want some strength to face difficulties. We might want a little fellowship to take away the loneliness. I hope we find these things. But those things are by-products; they are not really what we are about every Sunday at this altar. What we are doing is offering up human life, and the world we live in—all of it—for a process of transformation into the Body of Christ. We are offering our world to be made into Christ. We are here to be transfigured, transformed.

Sermons are supposed to lead us into some kind of action. They are supposed to answer the question, "Ok, what am I supposed to do now?" That is easy today. What we are supposed to do is simply to remember what happens at this altar, to

remember that we are offering ourselves and everything we touch to become the Body of Christ.

All we need to do is offer ourselves as ingredients to be transfigured by God's photosynthesizing light, to allow ourselves to become what God wants to make of us.

Let your light so shine through us, O Christ, that all we meet may see your face, hear your voice, and be drawn into your love.

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