

In the name of God who loves us like and mother and calls us to be changed.

I. Transfiguration Stories

The Gospel reading today is a turning point in the story of Jesus' life journey. We move from tracing his exciting birth to adulthood to now following his difficult journey to death and resurrection. In the church calendar we remember this shift on "Transfiguration Sunday," where Jesus seemed "momentarily transformed" into a different being right before the disciples' eyes, shining like the sun with bleach white clothes that glittered like that sparkle in Orbit gum commercials or a 1960's shaker dress. And the clouds and Moses and Elijah and a loud voice.... In keeping with ancient religious tradition, it was the perfect scene for receiving Divine revelation.

Under the larger umbrella of Christian tradition, there is a belief that we can get so mesmerized by what was happening around Jesus, we miss that Jesus didn't actually change in that moment. The disciples did. It was their eyes that were open to Jesus as the Divine Son of God. And it was the disciples who would be changed by this experience forever.

They had an extraordinary encounter with the Divine that left them awestruck and wanting to hold onto it somehow, like wishing the dreamy honeymoon would never end.

Seeing the Transfiguration this way, it was the disciples in that brief moment who let go of their need to understand who Jesus was logically or to get busy doing something or prove themselves and just – for a few blinks – fully connect with God present with them.

I've had several of these "transfiguration" experiences over the years. A few were dramatic moments from my charismatic days. But most of them were gradual and none of them ever involved light, fire, or clouds, or even mountains for that matter. In fact, most of the moments when I connected more fully with God involved ordinary events and people.

The years I worked at a peri-natal, substance abuse recovery center was one of those experiences of transformation. This recovery center was a residential, therapeutic community where I spent days and nights, weekends, and holidays with women who were trying to live without numbing addictions and with the hope of being reunified with their children.

As a staff member there, I was a minority in every way. I was white, I was a Christian, I was educated, I was married, I didn't have kids, I'd never been to jail or prison... or even arrested, I was a normie who hadn't even tried drugs ... you get the picture.

My co-workers were a mix of single women with children; African Americans and Latinas of various decent; Atheists, Mormons, and Buddhists. And they were committed to sharing their life stories as part of their ongoing recovery. I saw lots of prison pictures where generic numbers replaced personal names. As part of our weekly staff group therapy, I heard lots of stories that I couldn't even imagine happening.

After a while, I grew close to one resident-turned-staff in particular. I'll call her Rhee. Rhee was a recovering addict, HIV positive, and lived on campus. I spent time reading with her daughter, taking Rhee shopping, helping her clean her house, talking about everything in *her* life. (In fact, it was Rhee who eventually told me how the residents thought I was an undercover FBI agent when I first came to the program.)

Over time, her daughter would come and stay with my husband Paul and me to give Rhee a break. You should have seen me – totally ignorant about how to do Rhee's daughter's hair or trying to make her drink milk. Later, Rhee humorously schooled me on the errors of my way.

I had no idea what I was doing in our relationship... a lot of dumb stuff. Even some hurtful stuff in my amazing state of ignorance and desire to help her adjust to my understanding of what it means to be "healthy." Like the time I took her grocery shopping, and she filled up the cart with different kinds of meat, and I argued with her about how unhealthy meat is and she should abandon it all together. Rhee matter-of-

factly went on to tell me how different her culture is from mine when it comes to cooking.

Despite my earnest and misplaced energies, Rhee loved me and she told me so often. We laughed together, we cried together, we yelled at each other, and in our own ways, prayed for each other.

Then one day, I realized all the Christian rules I'd grown up with were meaningless next to the kind of love Rhee was sharing with me. Rhee was showing me the bottomless love and grace of God... and I didn't even know what was happening. God sharing through Rhee changed me.

And it worked because we were willing to be vulnerable with each other. We were both willing to let Divine light shine in the difficult places of our lives through sharing with each other our honest feelings, our fears, hurts, and hopes. It was scary, but it's like we both became more alive in the relationship.

II. The Power of Vulnerability

Professor Brene (?) Brown talks about this in her online seminar *The Power of Vulnerability* posted by TED. (Have you heard of TED? TED is a non-profit that focuses on the latest research and ideas around Technology, Entertainment, and Design.)

Brown noticed in her research that people who had the strongest feelings of belonging and being loved also had a strong sense of worthiness. She shared that this same group of people also had “courage to be imperfect” and “fully embarrassed vulnerability.”

Vulnerability, she continued, is necessary “for connection to happen; we need to allow ourselves to be seen, really seen.”

Yikes! Being vulnerable is counter-culture, like many of our values as followers of Christ. Yet, even in the Church, we work hard to build and maintain walls – not healthy boundaries – around ourselves to protect against hurts, to protect ourselves from really taking that honest journey together to the cross.

Brown outlined how we would rather numb ourselves, hold onto prideful certainty or perfection, cast blame, or simply pretend or deny anything's wrong. You know, *How are you today? Fine, and you? or What's wrong? Nothing.*

Instead, she encourages us to “let ourselves be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen; to love with our whole hearts... to practice gratitude and joy... and to believe that we are enough.”

Carl Gregg calls this “practicing transfiguration”:

the practice of allowing the light of God's love to shine through us. ...of gently letting go of our ego, the masks we wear, our busyness, and our distractions. ...practices of prayer, presence, and worship, open us from our isolation to connect us to God and to one another. We each reflect different aspects of the image of God, and practicing transfiguration allows God's image to shine more brilliantly through us in all our uniqueness and diversity.

III. A vulnerable and transforming journey

Turning from Epiphany to Lent, I offer this last reflection from Marianne Williamson's book *A Return to Love*. It is one of the wisdom bits the ordinands reflected on during our January ordination retreat. You may have heard it before, but it's worth repeating:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is

within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

Ash Wednesday and Lent popularly elicit feelings of unworthiness, but I don't agree with that part of our tradition. And I'm not alone. Lots of work has been done to recover that we ARE worthy and are invited to live INTO our worthiness as God's children.

So, when receiving the ashes of humanity on Wednesday, I hope you find yourself in that group of Professor Brown's that believes you are worthy and feel loved by God in Christ.

And rooted in this love, may we find the courage to make the vulnerable but transforming journey of connecting with God and each other.

Risky stuff... Any takers?

Collect

O God, who before the passion of your only begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Exodus 24:12-18

¹²The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." ¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." ¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Psalm 99

¹The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!
²The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. ³Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he! ⁴Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. ⁵Extol the Lord our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he! ⁶Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the Lord, and he answered them. ⁷He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them. ⁸O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings. ⁹Extol the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy.

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."