

Last Epiphany C March 3, 2019

Glory

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I will always remember the day I discovered that every day has the potential to be both someone's worst day and someone else's best day; and when a person finds themselves touching both the best and worst on the very same day, neither is diminished. Instead, in the midst of the best and the worst, God's glory is present and in such a moment the transfiguration is no longer a quaint story from the Bible symbolizing the Christian faith. It becomes something very real and illuminates the Love of God incarnate and in resurrection life.

The day I am talking about happens to be my husband and my wedding day. Unquestionably, a day that was for us one of the best days of our lives. Family and friends came from all over and packed my hometown church, where there was a prevailing spirit of joy and love. But the day didn't start that way. It started with my mother and I arriving at the home of a friend of mine who was a hairdresser and had started her own business by converting her garage into a hair and beauty salon. Jennifer and I had known each other for years and years, and although she did my hair, our relationship was deeper than a beautician and one of her clients. She had been with me through many important transitions of my life: high school and college and seminary graduations, my sister's wedding, big family events, and the routine stuff in between, and I had been there during all the changes in her life. After I was ordained a priest, I drove two hours from Sussex, Wisconsin to my hometown not just so Jennifer could do my hair, but so we could get caught up. She even took me in on Monday, which was her day off as well as mine. Despite difficulties in her life, Jennifer was one of the most generous people I know. And she was a joy to be around. It bothered me that Jennifer had done hair for numerous weddings and none of the couples, even couples she knew well, never invited her to their wedding. It bothered me so much I told my mother if I ever got married, Jennifer would be the very first name on my invitation list. And when Michael and I got engaged, that is exactly what happened.

Jennifer was about ten years or so older than me, and when she found out I was getting married at age 38, she couldn't have been happier for me, and, having been single herself for many years after a divorce, she said if I could get married, then maybe there was still hope for her. She accepted the invitation to come to our wedding with eager enthusiasm. I made it clear she wasn't just doing hair, she was part of our best day.

So when we arrived at her salon early in the morning to get going on our hair, we were surprised to see her salon uncharacteristically dark, and the door shut and locked. No response when we knocked. None when we called on the phone or hollered outside the door and windows of her house. We spent hours trying to contact her, leaving messages of concern. Finally, we called the sheriff's department. It wasn't until the next day that the sheriff's department called my mom to tell her what they found. But we already knew. We knew my beautiful young friend was gone. She had died in her sleep of a heart attack.

And that is very sad. Some might say it was tragic. It was for Jennifer's family one of their worst days. But you see, there was more to that day. For several years Jennifer had been talking about her greatest fear: which was dying alone and no one noticing she had died. But because she died on our wedding day, she wasn't alone. We were not able to go inside her house to be with her, but her phone was full of messages of love and concern. We noticed. My mother and I noticed. We cared. And we did what we could. We gave Jennifer the gift of our presence and witness that contrasted her fear no one cared.

And that does give a sadness to our wedding day. But it doesn't diminish our wedding day. It gives it something more. It gives it glory. In truth, I believe Jennifer was still there with us, just not in the way I would have preferred her to be. The way the best and worst intermingled in that one day touched me deeply. In a mysterious way I can't find the words to articulate well, that experience brought to light how God was right here with us, not just as incarnation, but as resurrection. It made it all very real for me. And when I tried to explain this to some clergy friends, they told me I had gone deeper into glory than most people ever do. Glory they said isn't just happy stuff, it's recognizing God is present in something that is both happy and sad maybe even at the same time and is what connects them both to God and to us.

I know that might be hard to understand, because it is also a mystery. I believe that glory connecting both the happy and the sad is part of the mystery of the transfiguration of Jesus, which we heard in our Gospel reading this morning.

On the Sunday before the season of Lent starts, we always hear about Jesus' transfiguration. We always hear about Jesus going up to a mountain to pray with a few of his disciples and how through their sleepy eyes they were suddenly dazzled by Jesus turning bright like light and two of the Old Testaments giants: Moses and Elijah show up to talk to Jesus about his death. It must have seemed to be one of Jesus' best moments to the disciples because Peter said they wanted to help make it last. But Peter wasn't in on the conversation between Jesus and Moses and Elijah. Maybe he didn't hear about the part that wasn't so great sounding; Jesus death. Maybe that is why God showed up in a cloud, which probably made it hard for the disciples to see, so they had to listen.

Every Sunday before Lent the Gospel does not stop at the transfiguration. It keeps going to the journey down the mountain, connecting what happened when Jesus is met by a large crowd and a man lamenting the disciples' failure to heal his son. I find it interesting that in response to this greeting, Jesus doesn't say anything nice or comforting. Instead he has a lament of his own, asking how much longer he has to endure being with a people he calls perverse and faithless. I'm pretty sure that doesn't mean Jesus is looking forward to his death. I wonder instead if Jesus' response is a form of frustration that despite all he does and says, people keep missing the point. They miss who he is. He isn't a miracle healer, he is the Son of God who didn't come to fix all human illness. Jesus came to restore us to God. Which doesn't mean illness won't ever happen. Or hearts won't get broken. Or death will cease to be a reality in this world. The resurrection doesn't negate these realities. Instead, it transfigures them. It means God enters into them not to fix but to be with us, and if we can see it, if we can recognize it, well then we experience a sort of awe and wonder, an astonishment, a humbling healing breath when we realize God really does love us and really is with us and somehow that makes the best and the worst part of each other deeply connected, and in the complexity that connection creates, there is the life and love of God intermingling with us.

I do not know if you have had such a humbling and powerful experience in your own lives yet. If you recognized it when it happened, or if it has yet to happen for you. Although it can be difficult to explain or understand, it is very real, and it can happen to you.

Perhaps one of the reasons why we hear about Jesus' transfiguration just before Lent is the Church is attempting in its way to help us transition from a season of light into the season of penitence, reflection, and restoration to help us understand that all the seasons of the church, like all aspects of life, are deeply connected. And when we can begin to recognize those connections in our lives, we can draw closer to them, and that is where growth can happen, growing closer to God and to each other. As we move from reflecting on how Jesus is the light of God's love and we as followers of Jesus are to radiate that very same light to the world, and move into the season of reflecting on our short-fallings, the ways we hurt one another, hurt the earth and hurt our relationship with God, perhaps today's Gospel is intended to help us see that God is never really absent from either the best ways we radiate God's love or the ways we fall short. And in truth, if we are unafraid to look deeply into those fears and short fallings, we all have, we might see how they are connected to some pretty good things. And the light of God in those connections might open our own eyes that can get weighed down

by the stuff of life and help us discover transfiguration is not just a story in the Bible, it is a mystery as real as we are, and it can and does happen to us. And when we can see it, that is when we may realize the glory of God is connecting the best and the worst in us and around us, and that is how the transfiguration becomes real any day. Glory.