

Our willingness to change

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 26, 2017

You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your heart. 2 Peter 1:18

Few if any of us has ever had a spiritual mountain top experience like that of Peter, James, and John. For them, the Transfiguration of Christ was a revelation of his full nature and mission. Moses had his mountain top experiences when he was confronted with the burning bush and again when he received the stone tablets on which were written the law and commandments. For Peter, James and John it was an ethereal experience to see Christ transfigured in dazzling white. With him appear visions of the great figures of the past in the form of Moses as the giver of the law and Elijah as the greatest of the prophets. The three disciples are told to listen to Jesus.

Jesus is revealed to us in both ordinary and extraordinary ways. At times he appears mysterious about who he is and at other times he is seen and heard in ordinary circumstances. While he knows that some would not understand, he has the confidence that the three disciples who are part of his inner circle have a better understanding of his full nature and mission. The marked change in his appearance in the Transfiguration affirms that Christ is no ordinary prophet, but the very real presence of God. The brightness of his appearance is more than the sun shining on him; it is a spark of his divine nature from within. The vision of Moses and Elijah together is assurance that Jesus as the long awaited Messiah is the fulfillment of all the law and the prophets.

Peter, James and John want to preserve this peak experience by building a shrine for each of them. The reality is that such a profound spiritual experience as this cannot be preserved in shrines, icons, paintings, or photos, but are best preserved in our minds and hearts. We retain in our memory those experiences that lift us up and bring us closer to an awareness of God's presence. We are made especially aware of God's power in times of stress, loss, and disappointment. These are occasions when we are transformed in understanding the full meaning of who we are as people of God.

Too often we rely upon our first impressions of people. In the early days of the civil rights movement, we had to change the way we perceived those who were different from us. Those brave souls who helped change our attitudes were remarkable in their calm determination in the face of vicious opposition. Through it all, they were sustained by their conviction that justice demanded that there be no discrimination on the basis of race or color. The more the opposition became intense, the more they remained resolute in their commitment to non-violent resistance. In countless demonstrations they faced the full brunt of bigotry and hatred in the specter of snarling police dogs, cattle prodders and fire hoses. They were not afraid to face down the old hatreds in the belief that the most important race to which we all belong is the human race.

Think of those who are different from you. What makes them different? Is it their color or origin or religion or politics? Not long after the attacks on our nation in 2001, while waiting in an airport terminal to board a flight, I noticed a man in the waiting area with a dark complexion and a beard and was dressed in a long robe. Not wanting to jump to conclusions, I looked more closely and saw that he was wearing a cross. When I spoke with him, I learned that he was a priest in the Coptic Church of Ethiopia. How easy it would have been to jump to conclusions and see him as a threat. With the reemergence of fear and suspicion we have to resist our tendency to make presumptions about those who appear to be different. When the love of Christ is alive in us, our perception of others is transformed in a better light.

To be lifted out of our old assumptions is a mountaintop experience in itself. We need to learn to perceive people in a different light and not rely on old attitudes with which we were brought up. It was a huge step for me when I learned to think for myself

by casting off the old attitudes that I had taken for granted. Instead of being in denial, we are better off admitting to our prejudices as the first step in breaking old patterns of how we react to people. To see Christ in those who are different from us is to be transfigured deep from within. Unless Christ is deeply imbedded in the very depths of our being, we cannot begin change our attitudes.

The awakening and transformation of our mindset is found in what has been called "Christification," a process by which we move from centering on ourselves to focusing on an awareness of others. When the objective becomes subjective, when the human spirit is transformed into the divine spirit, God's grace is alive in us.

Living the Christian life is about authenticity and integrity of character and overcoming the obstacles of our long held assumptions. In Christ, we are made a whole people in a world torn apart by fear, suspicion, falsehood and intolerance. When love wins out over hatred, when truth overcomes falsehood, Christ is wonderfully visible in us.