

February 4, 2018

*"The Transfiguration"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 9:28-36

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I don't know about you, but I am excited! Super Bowl LII is just a few short hours away. And this past week it seems that everybody in Patriot nation was totally engrossed in all the Super Bowl hype, all the supposed controversies, all the passionate back-and-forth rivalry between New England and Philadelphia fans, and especially, all the sometimes over-the-top hero worshiping and adulation of our team. Not that I would do anything like that. (Put on Patriot hat.) And, as expected, most of the attention has been focused on our super quarterback, Tom Brady. But you know, as much as we all love Tom Brady, I read an article the other day where he compared himself with Jesus. Let me quote: "Asked how he thought he ranks among the greatest quarterbacks of all time, Brady responded, 'Well, that's hard to say. You don't want to get too far ahead of yourself, but when all is said and done, I'm hopeful that I'll rank right up there with the best. I mean Jesus never won six rings.' The negative reaction has been swift, with even the Pope weighing in. In a statement from the Vatican the Pope said, "Tom Brady represents all that is wrong with today's society. Just because he's an extremely handsome man, with a beautiful wife, lots of money, has outstanding leadership skills and one of the highest completion percentages in the NFL history, that does not mean he ranks as an equal with Jesus. While it is true that Jesus never won six Super Bowl rings, he also never had a tight end like Rob Gronkowski."

Of course, I'm being somewhat satirical in order to make a point. Of course this never happened. But my point is... don't you think we've gone a little too far when it comes to the honor and reverence we give to our sport stars and celebrities. Like last week's Grammy Awards, to name another over the top event. Now there's nothing wrong with a little harmless escapism and entertainment, but when it becomes an unhealthy obsession... well that's another matter. According to the experts, over one hundred million Americans are expected to spend nearly four hours watching the Super Bowl today. And according to recent polls, only about one half that number will spend one hour attending church today. What does that tell us about where we put our priorities as a society? It's a good question to think about. Why do we give more awe and reverence and attention to someone who throws a ball, hits a home run, sings a song, acts in a movie, than we do to the God who created this incredible world we live in, who gave us our very lives, who literally died to prove his love for each and every one of us, and who is able to raise us to new, eternal life after this one? Have we lost all understanding of who really deserves our worship?

Author Anne Dillard wrote to this point in her book, *“Teaching a Stone to Talk.”* In it she makes quite a few critical comments about both pastors and congregations. She summed up her impression of most sermons in these words, “I was looking for bigger game, (greater things), not cute little moral lessons.” Something I and all pastors should take to heart! As for you in the congregation she says, “On the whole I do not find Christians (at all) sufficiently sensible. Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we invoke (every Sunday)? Or, as I suspect, does any one of you even believe a word of it? The churches are filled (with us just) killing a Sunday morning. And it’s madness to dress nicely. We should all be wearing crash suits and helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares and lash us to our pews. Because the sleeping God may wake up someday and take offense. Or,” she says, “the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.” The sleeping God may wake up someday and take offense at us. Or the waking God may take us to where we can never return!

And that is exactly what happened to the disciples in today’s scripture – the event known as the Transfiguration. Now next week is Transfiguration Sunday – it’s always the Sunday before Lent begins, because after the Transfiguration, Jesus heads to Jerusalem, where he knows the cross awaits him. But since we have Teen Challenge coming, I want to talk today about that mountaintop experience. Because it is a significant enough event that it’s presented in three of the four Gospels. Why? Well, let’s look at Peter, James and John. In many ways, they’re just like you and me, ordinary people trying to do the work of God the best we can. Sometimes we do well, sometimes we fall short, and sometimes we just don’t get it at all. And faithful, hard-working disciples often find the work demanding and sometimes exhausting. Don’t we? Just look at what transpired in the days and weeks prior to Peter, James and John climbing the mountain. First, Jesus sends the disciples out into the surrounding villages to tell people about the kingdom of God and to heal the sick, but to take with them no money, no food, no clothing, nothing. That had to have been some arduous undertaking. Then they’re involved in a miracle where they have to feed five thousand people. That had to have been overwhelming. Then as a reward for all their hard work and sacrifices, Jesus emphasizes, in no uncertain terms, that the demands put on his followers will be hard. Just before going up on that mountaintop, Jesus tells his disciples that they must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow him. Is it any wonder there are so few of us in church, willing to do this. So you can imagine what the disciples must have been feeling. They may have even been asking themselves the question that Anne Dillard posed, “Just what sort of power are we invoking.” And, my guess is that they were in need of a little reinforcement. A little confirmation as to the God they were serving. So Jesus takes

them up on the mountain, where he is transfigured before them – his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as lightning. Then, suddenly Moses and Elijah appear, and then in the midst of all this, a cloud envelopes the disciples, and God speaks directly to them. "This is my beloved son. Listen to him." Listen to him. How's that for the waking God drawing those disciples to a place where they've never been before? This had to have been an awe inspiring moment for those disciples on that mountaintop. The clarity and the energy they must have felt at that moment had to have made them feel this was all worthwhile.

And don't we get glimpses of that mountaintop experience once in a while in our own lives? Those moments where God's presence is so real, so powerful, it can only be described as divine. When we feel enveloped by his love and peace and comfort and strength and wisdom. I'm sure all of you have had moments like that. Think about them. And don't we wish we could stay in that moment forever? Peter did – "Can't we put up three tents and just stay here!"

But no, they couldn't stay there. There was work for the disciples to do. Jesus sends them back down the mountain, where they once again have to deal with the suffering and trials and demands of this earthly life. And that same holds true for us as well. Jesus sends us out – out, where we "enter the mission field," of our homes, our workplaces, our community and the world around us. He sends us out to deal with the hurting and lonely and broken, into a world that's difficult and indifferent. I'm reminded of the words of Eugene Peterson, who wrote The Message version of the Bible: "There is a spiritual war in progress, an all out battle. There is evil and cruelty, unhappiness and illness. There is superstition and ignorance, brutality and pain. God is in the continuous and energetic battle against all of it. God is for life and against death. God is for love and against hate. God is for hope and against despair. God is for heaven and against hell. There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square foot of space is contested." That is why Jesus calls each and every one of us to "take up our cross," follow him, and be his disciples in this world.

And so on this Super Bowl Sunday, and Transfiguration Sunday, let us remember Who deserves our absolute, undivided worship, and why. Let us pray: Lord, we thank you for those mountaintop moments when we so wonderfully feel your presence. And may we always give you the worship you deserve. But may we also remember that your love calls us to tough and dedicated living. May we all be willing to "take up our cross" and go into this difficult world to share your love and hope and joy. Amen.