

Akron Christian Reformed Church

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February 23, 2020      Transfiguration Sunday

Exodus 24.12-18; 2 Peter 1.16-21; Matthew 17.1-9

Healing our Relationship Through Great Pain

Prayer: We are hear this morning, dear Lord, to listen to you. Give us great skill and desire as we hear your voice. Help us to turn our heart towards you and your great love for us. Amen.

Broken relationships are particularly difficult to mend. It takes the willingness of both parties. If only one wants healing, it can't be done.

Often, both parties, need to acknowledge their role in breaking the relationship. And such acknowledgement may be painful and demand people to admit their mistakes and to seek forgiveness.

Sometimes, one party is at fault. In which case one person must seek forgiveness and grace, while the other must grant forgiveness and grace. Human beings are not wired to do any of this easily. Which makes broken relationship particularly difficult to mend.

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We've heard before that Jesus came into the world to save sinners. (1 Timothy 1.15) That's one way to construe the work of Christ. And I think it's the image that the church has tended to emphasize.

This morning I want to consider another image. The Christ came into the world, to illustrate God's great love for us, in order to mend our broken relationship with God.

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In our Gospel lesson this morning we again encounter the story we call The Transfiguration. Just as the lectionary always leads us to John the Baptizer at the beginning of Advent, so too it always leads us to the Transfiguration on the Sunday before Lent.

Quite honestly, it becomes tiresome. I groan every year as we approach this Sunday. And every year I search for something else to preach. But here it is, the Transfiguration, again.

But I don't feel like going through it and pointing out all of the similarities between the Mount of Transfiguration and Mount Sinai. I don't feel like talking about the similarities between Moses and Jesus, or John and Elijah. I don't feel like talking about Peter's inane outburst. I don't see the point of noticing that Jesus glowed. I don't feel like doing that because I've done it all before, and I'm bored with it, plus, and this is the important point, plus, none of those things are the heart of the story.

The heart of the story is when God speaks. Not Moses. Not Elijah. Not Peter. Not even Jesus. The heart of the story is when God speaks. When God says to Peter, James and John: "This is my beloved Son; with him I'm well pleased. Listen to him!"

"This is my beloved Son; with him I'm well pleased. Listen to him!" That's the heart of the Transfiguration story. That's the point. That's what we should hear this morning. So, let's consider those words.

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God says, "This is my beloved Son." The message that Jesus is the beloved Son of God is a message that alienates people. The Jews can't embrace these words. Neither can the Muslims.

Because neither can imagine that at the very being of God is a relationship. A relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They can't accept that possibility as they repeat God is One. God is One. God is One.

Only Christians have those words at the center of our faith. Which means, a relationship is at the center of the Christian faith. A social relationship. A familial relationship.

We discover here, on the Mount of Transfiguration, that the name God is more akin to a family name than it is a single being's name.

We don't err if we hear God say, "This is my beloved Son,"<sup>1</sup> and then we take that seriously. God is the one who's created the family metaphor to describe God's self.

And so, when God reveals the relationship within God's self, we also discern a truth about ourselves. This revelation is particularly significant to us because we've all been made in the image of God and we too are social creatures. We too are relationship creatures -- just as God is. We were created to live in relationship with each other and with God.

But our relationship with God was deeply damaged, if not downright broken. And we were too stubborn to repair it -- even if we could. Because, after all, relationships are particularly difficult to mend.

So, here on this Mountain, God establishes Jesus' identity, Jesus' authority, Jesus' reason for being. Jesus is the beloved Son of God and God's actually *delighted* by him.

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After those words, God gives Peter, James and John a command. In Greek it's a single sharp word (*akouete*). We translate it as, "Listen to him!"<sup>2</sup> The LORD God commands Peter, James and John to listen to God's beloved Son.

And we therefore wonder, "Listen to him, in regard to what?"

Well, in the story directly before the Transfiguration, "Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things ... and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Peter then, took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

And Jesus says to him, "Get behind me Satan! You're a stumbling block to me." (16.21-23)

Peter, you see, is sounding a lot like the Tempter did in the Wilderness, where Satan said: "You don't have to go through all of this Jesus. There are easier paths for you to be King." Peter sounds a lot like that.

Then, right after the Transfiguration, Jesus again says to the disciples, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered over to human hands. He'll be killed, and on the third day he'll be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief." (17.22-23)

At least Peter doesn't stand up this time and try to talk Jesus out of this crazy dying concept. He's begun to listen to Jesus when Jesus talks about his death.<sup>3</sup>

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I think that we're supposed to understand that this killing of Jesus was fully expected by the God-family when the Christ came into this world. The Christ didn't come lightly, to live with us. There's great pain within the God-family as the Christ leaves home and comes to dwell with us. There's great pain here at the Transfiguration, as Jesus turns his face towards Jerusalem and begins to move towards

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<sup>1</sup> These are the same words as at Jesus' Baptism in Matthew. In Mark and Luke God addresses only Jesus at the Baptism when God says, "You are my beloved Son."

<sup>2</sup> It's interesting that in 2 Peter, Peter doesn't include this command to listen to Jesus as part of what God spoke.

<sup>3</sup> In Matthew 20 Jesus talks about his death again.

his great suffering and death. And there's great pain within God as he hears his beloved son cry out, "My God. My God. Where are you?"

There's a rending of the relationship within the God family when Christ comes here, and when Jesus dies. Which causes us to wonder, "What was such a weighty reason for the Christ to come to be handled by us, and to create such great suffering within God?"

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And the only answer is that the relationship between us and God was damaged, and God wanted to heal it. But broken relationships are difficult to mend. Healing them can be exceedingly painful. And both parties must be willing to take steps towards restoration, otherwise things can't be healed.

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This morning, we're changing a bit, the language of the atonement. We've all grown up hearing legal definitions of what happens when Jesus dies. The church has tended to talk about the wrath of God being satisfied, or, the justice of God needing to be fulfilled. We've all heard that Jesus stands in for us and bears the wrath of God for us, and therefore, imputes righteousness upon us. Things like that. Which I'm sure are fair. (cf. LD 5 Heidelberg Catechism; Articles 21 & 23 Belgic Confession)

But I don't find those concepts to be particularly helpful. They're cold and impersonal words and concepts. And it's not how the Bible talks about what's happening with God and Jesus.

Scripture is much warmer, much more personal, and portrays God as suffering great pain because God's relationship with us is broken. And it portrays great suffering within God because of what God must do to heal this brokenness. Mending our relationship with God is deeply painful to God.

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And I believe that we're to see this great pain within God, as God offers to us grace, love, forgiveness, so that we may know and understand how much God loves us. God's willing to mend our brokenness through great suffering and death, as we actually experience and accept God's love.

God has extended to us an opportunity to be healed, simply by accepting God's love. It's not so much that God's wrath needs to be quenched, it's not so much that God's justice needs to be satisfied, it's not so much that the ledger needs to be balanced, as it is that our hearts need to be softened to receive God's love again.

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God doesn't say, first you must clean up your life, then I will love you. God doesn't say, first you must make yourself worthy, then I will love you. God doesn't say, first you must be rid of sin, then I will love you. God doesn't say, first you must change then I will love you.

No. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5.7) While our relationship with God was still broken, God and the beloved Christ suffered so that they may offer us God's love, in hopes, in hopes that we would accept his humble grace.

God says, you don't have to be someone other than who you are, because I already love you. God says, please accept my suffering for what it is, an attempt to restore you into relationship. Will you please accept my love?

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We begin to move through Lent this week. Lent is a time when we become acutely aware of the sacrifice of God to heal our relationship with God. Lent is a time when we set our face towards Jerusalem and we contemplate the great suffering that God, that the Christ, that Jesus is willing to endure solely so we may know how much God loves us.

Listen to Jesus. Hear God's voice.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

