

A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Transfiguration Sunday, February 3, 2008, dedicated to the memory of William Heer, II and to Celestine Clarke who entered glory today, to all who have been to the mountain top and seen the other side and always to the Glory of God!

“Out of the Clouds and into the Crowds”
Exodus 24: 12-18, II Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9

The season of Epiphany is a season of revelation, light, awakenings and the recognition of the “ah-ahs!” of life. It is also a season of God’s power becoming manifest in Christ Jesus. It always arrives on January 6 - 12 night of Christmas - with the wise men in the stable bearing gifts for the newborn king, and it ends with the Transfiguration of Jesus on a high and holy mountain. This year, Epiphany is as short a season as it ever will be - only five Sundays (sometimes it is nine or ten Sundays long). Let us celebrate today with Jesus as he moves out of the clouds and into the crowds.

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen

+++++

Once again God speaks to Jesus and all who have ears to hear. Just as God spoke at the edge of the Jordan River on Jesus’ baptismal day, now God speaks from the mountain top in the bright clouds on Jesus’ transfigurational day! God proclaims: **“This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased.”** This time, God adds, **“Listen to him!”** While only John the Baptist was a recognizable presence on his baptismal day, high on this holy mountain, Elijah and Moses appear and Peter, James and John are witnesses as Jesus is completely transfigured into pure light.

Just as Moses was joined in Exodus 24 by his 70 elders and Joshua when the Lord spoke upon the mountain of old, God speaks again - with the ancient prophets present - for a new generation, with a new plan of salvation and Jesus the Christ is glorified!

Our God doesn't waste words or moments of illuminating faith. God doesn't appear every day and speak out of the clouds every day. Here God communicates a crystal clear word and Matthew wants all generations to know about it. Here it is: God — and not Israel's religious, political or economic leaders — has identified Jesus as *“my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”*

All three clauses are important. The Gospel of Matthew proclaims Jesus primarily as the Messiah, the chosen Davidic heir who liberates Israel from what oppresses it. But in both of these “God-talk” incidents, Jesus is identified as more than the Messiah; he is identified as God's Son, “THE Beloved,” God is well-pleased with that unique incarnation of God's self as the “Son!”

The command that follows is inevitable: **“Listen to him.”** Take him seriously for it will be this One who will lead you, the nation and all humanity to the acting out of God's intentions for humanity — the building of the shalom community, which is after all the purpose of God for humanity to create and sustain a peaceable world!

Dale Bruner, in his commentary on Matthew, *The Christbook*, suggests that what this chapter is all about is power, a display of the power that is the strength and motivating force of the church. Bruner notes:

In the seventeenth chapter we have three major stories: the Transfiguration, the conversation about Elijah, and the healing of the disciples' inability. The first story takes place on top of a mountain, the second on the way down the mountain and the third at the foot of the mountain. On the mountaintop we learn who has supreme power in the church; on the walk down we learn that suffering is the form this power takes; and at the foot of the mountain we learn how disciples

put Jesus' power to work in the world. The whole chapter, then, is about power in the church: where it is lodged, its form, and its use (The Christbook: Vol. 2, p. 164).

Robert Linthicum in his reflections on this text adds: “The story of the Transfiguration is a lesson on power, perhaps *THE* lesson on power. It deals with power in two ways. First, it deals with the nature of power. And second, it deals in whom power ultimately resides” (Robert Linthicum, from the Partners in Urban Transformation website, February 3, 2008). *

First, the story of the Transfiguration deals with the nature of power. That nature is manifested as much in the continuation of the story as Jesus walks down the mountainside (out of the clouds and into the crowds) reflecting with his disciples on what they had just witnessed as it did with Jesus on the mountain transfigured before Moses and Elijah. In that reflection, Jesus says to Peter, James and John, *“The Son of Man is about to suffer at their (that is, the establishment’s) hands”* (vs. 12).

That is, true Godly power is not the power of domination, but the power of servanthood, the power of suffering, the power of commitment to others. God’s power is not afraid to suffer at the hands of the political, economic or religious powers, but in that suffering, God can transform the world.

The authentic nature of power is magnificently articulated by Jesus when Matthew tells of Jesus’ reflection about power with his disciples in Matthew 20:25-28. Jesus states that *“the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over the people, and their great ones are tyrants over them”* (20:25). He goes on to instruct his disciples, *“It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”* (20:26-28).

In this profound statement, Jesus demonstrates that the image of a servant captures the essence of true power. Both Roman governor and Jewish rebel, both Jewish high priest and Palestinian peasant understand power essentially as being that of domination of power *over* another, of power *pressed down* upon another. But what Jesus suggests that Godly power - transfiguration power - is something profoundly different.

Jesus is teaching that authentic power is “servant power.” The “*one who gives his life as a ransom for many*” (20:28), the one who is about to suffer at the establishment’s hands (17:12), captures the essence of true power.

From a high and holy mountain, Jesus delivers a down low message about the power of relationships. You see, God is all about relationships. God’s work is demonstrated in and through relational terms - loving kindness, *agape* love, *phileo* (brotherly) love, grace, truthfulness and covenant. God’s beloved son is all about relationships, too! Jesus’ relational power is shared power, mutual power, reciprocal power, power with not power over. This is not the power of weakness, acquiescence or apathy. It is direct, specific, realistic, flexible, accountable and negotiable. But it is a power that is built upon the relationships one has carefully built with others that seeks the good of the other as well as oneself. Therefore, by definition, it is a power that seeks “not to be served but to serve, even if that means “suffering unto death at the establishment’s hands.”

This is the radical power demonstrated in the events of the Transfiguration. As Jesus is praised by God on top of the mountain, instructs frightened disciples on the way down the mountain and heals a boy with a demon at the foot of that mountain - radical power shines through as relational power. From mountaintop to valley crowds, from pure light to healing presence, Jesus demonstrates the power of relationships.

Relationships are the most precious part of our lives as well. Just as our God is a relational God and our Savior is all about relationships, we must be too. Take time for the relationships of your life. Take time to hold one another, be with one another and love one another. Life is too short to miss this truth.

Second, the story of the Transfiguration deals with the One in whom power ultimately resides. It does not reside with “Moses,” nor does it reside with “Elijah.” “Moses,” of course, refers not only to the man himself, but also with what that man represented - the Law of Israel that was designed to bring God’s order to them. Likewise, “Elijah” refers not only to the man himself but to Israel’s prophetic tradition whom this one, the greatest of the prophets, represents. Moses and Elijah are present, not to receive recognition from God but to encourage Jesus, to reflect with him, to stand with him. But it is not they whom God commends. Rather it is Jesus! “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.” Listen to *him* - not to Moses, not to Elijah, but listen to, obey and follow Jesus.

So in whom does God’s power reside? It resides, in the final analysis, not with the Law nor with ecstatic religious experience, but with Jesus. Follow him and Listen to Him!

As we come to the table today, I pray that the power of God within us and around us in “the Beloved Son” transfigures us inwardly and outwardly. I pray that the light and power of Christ may shine even more in our inward, spiritual life in Christ. I pray that we are given power from the inside out and the outside in. I pray that our transfiguration begins in humbling ourselves, in opening ourselves to kindheartedness, servant leadership.

As we step into the powerful relationship, our transformation may be gradual. It may often seem imperceptible. But it is no less than the light of God changing the spiritual garments of our lives to light. Sometimes our family and close friends will see the change more clearly than we are able to. When they point it out, it may still be imperceptible to us. But change from glory into servanthood, from clouds into crowds is no less than the work of our marvelous, relational, powerful God who in justice, love and humility is calling us to listen to the Beloved son and to follow him. Amen.

**I offer special thanks and recognition this week to Robert Linthicum's lectionary study on Matthew 17:1-9 upon which I have drawn for this sermon. Dr. Linthicum is an author, teacher, organizer and has been a mentor for me on the journey.*