“Moses, Elijah and Jesus: Thrice Blessed!”
II Kings 2:1-12; II Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

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February 15, 2015

From the Pulpit
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A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, February 15, 2015, Transfiguration Sunday, dedicated to Fraylee Ann Williams on her baptismal day, to all the new members and their children as they begin to walk in their journey of faith with us at First Church and always to the glory of God!

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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.

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How many times in your life have you had the experience that things are not as they appear to be? People are not as they appear to be. We “button-hole” them. By this I mean we put them in a little box of our creating and our imagining. We define them in certain ways. We see them as “good” or “bad,” “happy,” or “angry,” “joyful” or “depressed,” “narrow-minded” or “open-minded.”

If we were honest with each other, we could make lists of people we had put on our lists over time and admit that we perceived them all wrong – for better or for worse. It is
human nature to misperceive or label another person. It is all too common to be blind to the truth about someone else.

This past week, I had a small day of reckoning with someone I hadn’t given much thought to but was blind about on one big thing. Dean Smith, the great basketball coach of North Carolina, passed away last Saturday, February 7th. While I knew he was a great coach and I loved that Coach Smith broke the color barrier in college basketball at North Carolina by bringing African American coaches and players to the university and while I admired his dedication to his family and players – all positives on life’s ledger in the Ahrens’ judgment business - what I never knew about Dean Smith – something that humbled and moved me when I read it – Coach Dean Smith was an activist against the death penalty. Dean Smith was no “dumb jock” – quite the opposite.

Dean Smith was a death penalty abolitionist and activist. He fought the death penalty in North Carolina for most of his life! He would take his players to visit death row inmates. He spoke at clemency hearings. In 1998, he joined clergy members who were defending John Nolan’s right to live as he pointed his finger at Governor Jim Hunt and said, “You’re a murder!” He continued around the table pointing at every member of the clemency board and the clergy too and said, “You’re a murder, and you’re a murder.” And then
he pointed his finger back at himself and said, “And I’m a murderer! We are all murderers in this state when we execute our fellow citizens.”

Dean Smith did more than talk. He wrote personal notes to accompany every petition he signed on the death penalty to every state senator. He recorded messages for People for the Abolition of the Death Penalty. His messages would begin with something like this, “I’m sorry to bother you, but…” He organized coaches across North Carolina to join him in his efforts. He made major donations to Abolitionist efforts – including auction items and much more.

Grounded in his faith and the community he found at Binkley Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, Coach Smith humbly and graciously answered the call to activate against the death penalty. As a fellow Christian and an activist on this issue, I am embarrassed to say I had NO idea Dean Smith was THIS great a man. He was better than I ever imagined. Believe me – I have made worse judgments than this one. This balanced for the good while some have harmed others.

Dean Smith’s “death talk” is as scriptural as are his “dead man walking” testimonies. As followers of a Savior who was executed by the Roman Empire through their first century state form of the death penalty – crucifixion - we
can relate to Coach Smith’s declaration that we are all murderers. Before Jesus ever goes up the high and holy mountain with Peter, James and John, he is announcing his execution. Jesus is speaking of his pending passion while his disciples are in walk about in denial.

Then it happens. Upon the mountain they see what and hear what no person has seen or heard since his baptism. The heavens open and God speaks declaring “This is my beloved Son! LISTEN TO HIM!” If words are not enough, Jesus changes into a light beam right before their eyes. And if that is not enough, how about Moses - the great giver of the law and Elijah - the greatest prophet of Israel’s all – making appearances for God’s light show?! They too become Lightbeams of God…eventually disappearing into the spectrum of light as the mountain is covered with clouds. It is appropriate that Moses and Elijah join Jesus because it Jesus who is the embodied fulfillment of both the law and the prophets. Who better to join his Transfiguration Coming Out Party than Moses and Elijah?!

We often don’t really see those who are close to us. We are blind to the depth of their true selves. Like the disciples, we go about blindly or blithely paying little or no attention to those who are next to us. We are not blinded by their light so much as blinded by all our misperceptions of who they really are.
Our gospel story in Mark is bookended by healing stories in which Jesus heals those who are blind. Yet, his disciples cannot see. That is the real message in Mark. He tells this story of unseeing disciples from beginning to end. They don’t see him on the Mountain of Transfiguration. They also don’t see him on the Mountain of Crucifixion. It is as if they can’t see their beautiful Savior — right before their eyes!

Why does this matter today? I believe it makes all the difference in the world. In today’s gospel, Peter, James and John join Jesus on a high mountain. Instead of going off to pray alone, this time he brings along some of his disciples. He is alone together with them when Moses and Elijah show up. Here is the Mystical Prophet who ascended into heaven in II Kings 2 on a chariot of fire and the Liberating Leader Moses who delivered his people to the Promised Land — but was buried in an unmarked grave on a mountain across from the passage of entry into Promise join Jesus. God needs some witnesses this time! Peter, John, and James are meant to be witnesses to God’s Light, God’s Truth, and God’s Liberating Presence in this world. The three are witnesses to the Glory of God — made manifest in Jesus the Christ -God’s ultimate fulfillment of Elijah and Moses. A witness is usually defined by one who sees and then tells others what they have seen. In this case, they see the Glory
of God in Jesus Christ and yet they are told to hold on to this in their hearts. Their time to tell will be revealed to them – following Christ’s rising from the dead.

Open your eyes today. The glory of God is everywhere present. Don’t miss it. I see God’s glory in Fraylee’s baptism. I see it in Grace Glaros who turned eight yesterday – a miracle of life. I see it in our children and our ever-growing younger congregation. I see God’s glory shining in the eyes and love of our long time members who seek to be present every single Sunday. I see God’s glory shining in you – travelling through terrible conditions to worship God this day.

The challenge and the true joy is to see God’s glory in all the people across all my life in whom I have failed to see it before. But, this Transfiguration Sunday, you and I have been given a new chance to open my eyes and behold God’s Beloved Son standing shoulder to shoulder with Elijah and Moses. We have all been thrice blessed today. Let us not walk away from this threefold blessing. Amen.

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