

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Barbara R. Cunningham,  
Minister for Pastoral Care at the First Congregational Church, United  
Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, on February 22, 2009,  
Transfiguration Sunday, dedicated to the Glory of God!*

## **“THIN PLACES”**

### **Mark 9:1-4**

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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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We all have heard the story of Elijah and Moses appearing on the mountain, the frightened disciples and the glow on Jesus' face. The disciples were terrified, yet wanted to please – to build a booth for them, to hold them here. They did not even know Jesus was leaving them soon.

We have so much information we try to figure out what and why things happened. We as humans do not recognize the thin places between the divine and the human. Barbara Bradford Taylor describes “thin places” this way. She and her husband went to Ireland, where they trekked up a mountain to see a holy place. Those who had gone before had found ponds of water that looked like they could be walked on, with a thin layer of ice on them. They had been marked with small rocks all around the outside so that people would not step in them.

We have a lot of obstacles keeping us from knowing what is on the other side, the thin places we can step on if we are not careful, and that take us to the other side.

Let's focus for a moment on the glow of Jesus. He is absolutely white with light. For me, that is the reference to the

healing light, the presence of God shone in the light. In 2 Cor., 4:6 it states, “For it is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’ ” Focus on light in your life – top of head, etc.

Now in experiencing the light, the moments of Elijah and Moses on the mountain top, it says to me there is a thin place between this life and the next. Where do we experience the thin places and where is the light that shines on those thin places to make them holy for us – where we know God is present? How do we show God’s presence to others and recognize it in our own lives? How do we know when we have come to a thin place, and when to cross over?

We worry when we come to the thin places for we do not know what is on the other side. I experienced the fear of a thin place. It was late in the afternoon when we arrived in Pittsburgh for a conference. It is always exciting to me to be at some familiar conferences where friendships will be renewed, new issues will come to the fore and I feel refreshed when I return home.

I had just greeted a friend of 30 years when the check-in woman at the desk said, “Rev. Cunningham, you have an urgent message to call your secretary.” Answering the call, I found out that my 88-year-old mom had fallen and broken her hip and was in the hospital, 2,000 miles away. She had six children, all living, but none close that day. There was a knot in my stomach, tears on the edge of my eyes and a feeling of failure in my heart. We were all so far away, and I take care of others here, why weren’t we there to care for her when she needed us?

My first reaction was fear – fear that this was the end for her; fear that I had not said all that I needed to say. Guilt rose its ugly head. I had guilt because I knew she needed ME, singled out from all the rest of her children (arrogance personified). Then a calm came over me and I began to make phone calls, including one to her in the hospital, realizing that the thin place was crossed by telephone. Thin places may not just be to the other side, but across the other side of the country. I had to trust the doctors, my sister

who lived there and the mystery of things unknown. Feelings become thin places in relationships across the miles.

Faith in God tells us that we are not alone, and we cross over the thin places, get the support we need and take care of the situation all by ourselves. Sometimes we'd rather God take care of it for us, but we are in need of caring for ourselves – that is the freedom we have. Being the fixer that I am, I wanted to be like Peter when he suggested that they build the booths for Elijah, Moses and Jesus, in order to keep them there and make them comfortable. I wanted to fix my mom to keep her here.

We are given what we need to make decisions, to face life's joys and sorrows, and to be God's light to the world. Sometimes in being the reflection of God's love in the world, we become distorted like a shadow. Reflections are not perfect, and they change over time. Yet no matter the excuses we use, as long as we call ourselves Christian, we are the reflection of God's love in the world.

We have been told, since Jesus' baptism, that he was sent to be the light of the world and then in our baptism we are also given the call to be the light. WE ARE CALLED! WE ARE IT, FOLKS! We are called to be the hands, eyes, ears and heart of God's love, to celebrate, to grieve, to heal, to hold each other. We have faith that God is with us. We give evidence to that fact by being the reflection of God's love.

Take a moment and look at your hands. Hold them up and feel the energy between them. That is the energy you give to another person when you are being the hands of God.

I read the other day about a woman who was praying in an empty sanctuary. One of the church staff members walked by an open door, saw her there, and was moved to enter and just touch her on the shoulder. The woman turned around quickly with a radiant face, and was disappointed. She told the person, "For a moment, I thought it was God touching me!" The staff person responded, "Whose hand did you think God would use?"

We would like to have a more visible God, preferably with skin and a frame, a God we could touch and be touched by. God is

present, in all of those around us. We are the reflection of God, the light to the world, just as Jesus was white with light.

What keeps us from being the pure reflection of God's light into the world? First, we have a lack of vision. Throughout this life, we have doubts, we succeed, we fail and we continue to believe God is with us. Yet our lack of vision keeps dimming the light. We limit the vision to see beyond what is expected of life. We need to look deeper at what makes us do things. We need to look deeper into the soul of another person, to see inside instead of just the surface. If we have a vision, we will live out our call and be the reflection of God as we understand it.

The second thing that keeps us from being a reflection of God's love is vanity – doing something for another person only because it gives us pleasure or because we will get something in return. Living takes giving and receiving – a balance.

Years ago, when I was serving in California, a group of us decided to celebrate our birthdays by giving to someone else – like in a nursing home. We each chose one person to visit. After a short period of time, one of the women dropped out of the project stating that she needed a person who could talk to her, because she didn't know what to do. It turned out that the person she was assigned was a stroke victim and couldn't talk. She could understand, but no one wanted to take the time to be with her silence.

I decided to see if I could communicate with the woman and how that would feel to me. I took her hand in mine as I said hello. For the first few minutes I just held her hand, and looked at her frightened eyes. Tears began to flow down both our cheeks as we said goodbye the first day. I promised to come back – went back the next day, and talked a bit, held her hand and just sat with her. We developed a friendship, different than any I'd ever had, but it was wonderful. She died not long ago, and I wondered if anyone ever held her hand after I left. God's love is given in many ways, and I received much of it from her.

We are, in our vanity, inclined to talk about our legacy by what awards we have received, what successes we have

accomplished. What we want to be able to say as Christians, is that I clothed the naked, or visited someone in prison, or fed the hungry. When our vanity demands return for helping others, we will get little. If we can fill our emptiness with love and give it to another, the message of love and the light of God's love will be seen around the world.

Finally, we cloud the reflection of God's love by our lack of vitality. We seek perfection, yet we experience brokenness. No one escapes some brokenness, and some are just little chips or cracks. No matter what our success, the little hospital gown that we are given to wear looks the same on all of us. Having vitality means pacing ourselves, adjusting our priorities, and listening to the silence. When the snow first begins to fall, it is beautiful and silent. It brings a sense of peace, and gives light to the night.

Listen to the silence. We can create a vision that sees beyond the obvious. We can create a vision that touches the untouched, that goes beyond our expectations. We can give up our vanity, our emptiness, and fill ourselves with the gift of giving to others without knowing the outcome. We can trust that God's love often reaches beyond the tangible results we expect. We can renew our vitality by pausing, letting go, and by bringing back creative purpose. We give light to others around us and in the world.

I close by reading the paraphrase of Psalm 40:1-11 (from *Everyday Psalms*, 1994, by Jim Taylor)

*I believed I could make it on my own, but I slipped and fell,*

*I sank into a morass of my own making, God heard my cry.*

*God lifted me out of the mire and set me on solid ground.*

*Like any convert to a new life,*

*I must talk about what has happened to me.*

*I am willing to risk being a bore;*

*If just one person hears me, my work has not been wasted. Too many today chase false gods;*

*They try to multiply their own gains.*

*But the richest returns come from God.*

*You can't begin to count your blessings!*

*God does not want us to wear frowns or long faces;*

*God wants us to find childlike joy in shining drops of dew, in  
whispering pine needles, in warm mud between the toes.*

*Our delight becomes one with God's; our personalities meld.*

*So I will not keep silent; I will proclaim my good news privately and  
publicly.*

*I cannot keep it to myself.*