

Rev. Dr. Steven W. Manskar

March 3, 2019, Transfiguration of the Lord
Luke 9:28-36
“God is Love”

This has been a difficult week. The actions of the General Conference in St. Louis have done great harm to our denomination. My heart aches for everyone who is hurting and questioning if they should stay or leave. Please always remember that while General Conference is the only body that can officially speak for The United Methodist Church, it is a terribly flawed body the frequently makes horrible decisions. The General Conference is NOT the church. The church of Jesus Christ is in every local congregation. The action of the General Conference is going to be reviewed and ruled on by the April meeting of the Judicial Council. It does not change who we are or what we do here at Trinity. Our work and mission continues.

I don't think it's an accident that the first Sunday after our General Conference is the last Sunday before Lent. I believe the Holy Spirit works through the church calendar. It's good that we reflect upon the Transfiguration of Jesus at the end such events as the General Conference. I think the Gospel lesson helps us remain grounded in Christ and his mission.

The Scriptures chosen for the Sundays after Epiphany reveal Jesus and his mission. On the first Sunday we read about Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River. In the waters of baptism Jesus proclaims, "I'm one of you. I'm with you." The Holy Spirit descended upon him and Jesus hears the voice from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This tells us God is with us in spite of our sin and through all the trials, temptations, joys, and sorrows of this life. Even today, when we feel hurt and hopeless Christ is with us. Our hope is in Christ.

The second Sunday we read about a wedding party in Cana of Galilee. When the wine ran out Jesus turned hundreds of gallons of water into really fine wine. Jesus loves a good party, he wants us to enjoy the goodness of life. He reveals the kingdom of God is like a party and a celebration of the goodness of life.

The third Sunday Jesus shows up at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He's invited to read the scripture from Isaiah 61 which proclaims his mission:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus is God's good news for the world, especially for the ones the world beats down, excludes, and exploits. Jesus tells us God's kingdom turns the world as it is upside-down. God is for the people who are crushed and abused by the world that worships success, wealth and domination, what the Bible calls "mammon."

The fourth Sunday Jesus tells his hometown synagogue God loves and accepts all people, even foreigners, refugees, and outcasts. God's love is not limited or conditional. God loves people simply because God made them.

The fifth Sunday we read how Jesus called his first disciples to follow him. He chose common, working people, fishermen. Jesus knew he needed a community of friends around him to carry out his mission. We need one another just like Jesus needed his disciples.

The sixth and seventh Sundays after Epiphany give us Jesus' teachings about life in God's kingdom. Blessed are people who are poor, hungry, mourning, and despised by the world because of loyalty to God's kingdom. Jesus warned against the dangers of putting our faith in wealth, security, relevance, and popularity. He challenges us to not only love the ones who love in return, who look and think like us. Following the way of Jesus requires loving all people, even our enemies. Loving like Jesus means treating all people with respect and dignity. Respect and honor due them because they are created by God in the image of God. Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, to treat them as we want to be treated, to be merciful as God is merciful. Jesus reminds us that God loves us and God loves our enemies.

In these Sundays between Epiphany and today we see everywhere Jesus went crowds of people came to him to hear what he had to say and to be healed. He accepted and healed everyone, without condition or exception. He never asked anyone if they were deserving of his attention. He never asked if they were Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free. Jesus never asked about anyone's sexual orientation or gender identification. All he saw were people created in the image of God who were needed healing. Scripture tells us he loved and healed them.

In today's lesson Jesus goes up the mountain to pray with his first three disciples, Peter, John, and James. While he's praying his appearance is transfigured. His face and clothes are glowing white. The Moses and Elijah show up to talk with him.

Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets of the Scriptures. Their appearance with Jesus on the mountain, with Jesus in conversation with them, tells us we are to interpret Scripture through the lens of Jesus Christ. Which means Scripture is to be read and interpreted through the lens of God's love embodied in the teachings, life, death, and resurrection of God's Son. This is affirmed by the voice that spoke to Peter, John, and James from the cloud that surrounded them: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

If you read through an interpretive lens that is not centered in God's love for the world, then you're doing it wrong.¹

There's an exclamation point at the end of that declaration of Jesus' identity. The voice of God to the disciples tells me that the church is called to follow Jesus' teachings and way of self-giving, self-emptying love. We are not to judge who is worthy of God's love and acceptance. God has already done that in Jesus. And Jesus loves all people, especially those whom the world rejects.

I want everyone to understand that General Conference is NOT The United Methodist Church. The church is right here, in you. This is where the work of the church is done. This is where the love of God in Jesus Christ is proclaimed, lived, and shared with the world. God has placed this congregation here, at this time, for such a time as this; to be an outpost of God's love and justice for all people. All means all! Amen.

¹ What I'm talking about here is the discipline of hermeneutics, which is the discipline that deals with how Scripture and other literary texts are interpreted. I'm arguing here that the transfigured Jesus conversing with Moses and Elijah, who represent the Law and Prophets of Scripture, tells us that Scripture must be understood and interpreted through the lens of Jesus Christ, his life, teachings, death, and resurrection. The Wesleyan tradition teaches and practices a hermeneutic of love.