

Transfigured
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Matthew 16:24-17.8

An old man was sitting on a park bench, relaxing and enjoying the beautiful weather when along came another old man who sat on the bench across from him. Their eyes met briefly, they nodded at one another, but neither said anything. They just sat there, staring straight ahead. After a few minutes, the first man heaved a heavy sigh. "Well!" said the other man, jumping up to storm off. "If you're going to talk politics, I'm leaving!"

How many of you have a friend or family member with whom you disagree? Is there someone that you stopped having coffee with or started going the other way when you saw them coming? Maybe you've learned that you are on opposite sides of "hot button" issues like sexuality, religion or politics. Or maybe you're holding onto the pain of something more personal, and the way they once treated you still hurts.

One of the first questions I'll ask couples who I am counseling is: How do you fight? Think about it. The conflicts we care the most about are with those with whom we already have a significant relationship. Navigating conflict is a normal part of relationships and can be very healthy and beneficial to growing closer, if handled with care.

Why do we have conflict in the first place? Wouldn't our lives be healthier if we could avoid it altogether? Some days, I find that is my only goal in life... to get through the day with as little conflict as possible. Because hostile, aggressive, insistent conflict isn't healthy. Then again, neither is the passive, low-simmering, repressed, pretending-everything-is-OK kind.

Sometimes, in the church anyway, conflict comes as a result of wanting to build tabernacles or monuments to our past, that keep us stuck. Yet God does not want us to lock ourselves into the past on some mountain distant from the world's concerns. Instead God wants to drive us down the mountain, into the valleys of present need, where we can answer God's calls to transform ourselves and our community in healing ways that ready us for God's future for us.

We see this in how the disciples want to build tabernacles to Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Moses embodies the Law and rituals given to their ancestors on Mount Sinai; and Elijah is the prophet who pointed to God in their toughest times, the one who wrote much of the Scriptures of Israel we know as the Old Testament. By wanting to give them each equal footing, a tabernacle side by side with Jesus, the disciples are showing that they expect Jesus to come and bring things back to the way things used to be in Israel, to the good old days of Elijah and Moses.

But that's not what Jesus is about. Jesus is bringing something new, something they can't expect unless they listen to God's still-speaking voice through Jesus and the Spirit. It flows out of and fulfills what God said through Moses and Elijah in the past, but it is not the past: it is instead a new covenant in his blood written on our hearts, not the old covenant written on tablets of stone.

This week, a number of churches have made national news – most notably the Southern Baptists and Catholics over how to deal with the crisis of sexual abuse by clergy in their churches; and the United Methodists as they struggle over whether and how to welcome gay people. Each is attempting to determine whether to stay in place, clinging onto their past, to how things have always been done, or whether to embrace new paths responsive to the pain of so many, paths that are open to new ways God might be opening them up for the future.

Here at the Monroe Congregational Church we can't throw stones at these other Christians. We too can get caught up in this same problem, can't we, becoming nostalgic for how things have always been done before here or how things used to be in the good old days? We can hold onto traditions and practices that used to help people in the past but now only make us comfortable, without really helping any other people longing for God find their way.

Friends, God does not want us building altars on the mountains of the past, staying stuck there, unresponsive to the needs all around us in the present and to what new things the Spirit may call us to in the future.

No, God wants us looking down into the valleys of the communities all around us, to those people hurting and needing a spiritual home, a word of good news from God, or a helping hand.

So the question we need to ask is: How is God still speaking in this moment, today? How can we change what we do as a church and as Christians to meet folks where they are with God's love, and make sure they truly feel welcome here?

On the mountain, Peter, James and John were amazed to see Jesus shining like the sun and to hear a voice from the clouds saying, "*This is my Child with whom I am well pleased.*" They had had an experience that changed the way they viewed Jesus, yet, in the next moment they turned and went down the mountain to continue their work, for they had much to do.

Do you ever wonder what it would be like if we could see past outer appearances and witness the bright inner beauty of each Child of God? What effect would that have on the world? What could we accomplish together?

Jesus saw God in everyone he encountered, whether a tax collector or Mary his mother, persecutor or disciple, poor or wealthy. We are called to be the unwavering love of God in a perpetually wavering world. Let that soak in. You are the object of God's boundless love. You are a beloved Child of God.

We have work to do. Yes, there are serious conflicts that need to be transfigured. The rights and personhood of LGBT people are indeed being questioned. It really matters what our immigration policies are. We need to deal with homelessness. Climate change is affecting the future of our planet. Racial and gender equality is affecting us now. And we don't even all agree on what it all means.

But even in our deepest disagreements, we are called to see God in the other, because the God who loves us without hesitation loves the other without hesitation too.

We have all likely experienced God's grace or love at some point in your life. The transfiguration of our hearts has already begun. But sometimes it goes so slow. Pulling together. Pushing together. Mourning together. Rejoicing together. It's not easy, but it's worth it. And sometimes it demands from us more than we are comfortable giving.

But go ahead and take that next step anyway. Be transfigured. Get up, and don't be afraid. Amen?