

Sermon for Transfiguration Sunday, February 14, 2010
Preached at Episcopal Church of the Resurrection, Alexandria, Virginia
Readings (RCL, Year C): Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-43

"Love and Transfiguration"
by
N. Chase Danford,
Seminar Assistant

Let us open our hearts and minds in prayer through this word of poetry by the Rev. Ann Fontaine:

Tiny star
of morning.
Born in the
smallest of stables
spreading from manger
to shepherd
to magi
to beloved
to teacher.
Expanding out
into the universe.
Calling everyone and everything
home to the heart of Love.
Transfiguration reveals
what was always there:
A supernova exploding
into our hearts and minds.
Now we feel the black hole
tugging pulling dragging us
into that heart
in our journey through Lent
to the fullness of Easter.

Amen.

That was "Transfiguration"¹ by Ann Fontaine, an Episcopal priest and a writer. Today is Transfiguration Sunday, and Fontaine says better than I could what the Transfiguration of Our Lord is about, but I will attempt to further give flesh to this event and give attention to the practical significance of living as Transfiguration people.

"Now the lord is the Spirit,²
and where the Spirit of the lord is,
there is freedom.
And all of us,
with unveiled faces,
seeing the glory of the lord
as though reflected in a mirror,
are being transformed into the same image

¹ <http://seashellseller.blogspot.com/2008/01/transfiguration.html>

² 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 (NRSV)

from one degree of glory to another"

We have in our lessons two stories of individuals so filled with the Spirit of the Lord that they shine from the encounter. Moses goes up Mount Sinai and our lesson tells us that because he had been talking with God, the skin of his face shone. In the gospel reading, Luke tells us that the same thing happens to Jesus while he is praying on the mountain. The difference is that Moses chose to veil his face because his people were frightened by his appearance. Paul, in the lesson from 2 Corinthians, expects that we too—ordinary people, not figures like Moses or Jesus—will shine from our encounter with the holy. Paul surely knows that we won't literally shine with the brightness of the sun, but he also knows that the light of God that lives within us will show forth in our lives, if we do not hide it with a veil. And how will this light shine forth from us? Primarily through love. As the 1st Letter of John says, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." When we love, we see the truth of what is always there, but that we do not always see—that God, who is love, dwells in each and every one of us. And Jesus, the Son of God, the Incarnate One, who was the revelation of God's love in this world, must have shone brilliantly with love on that day, up on the mountaintop. This is what Transfiguration is all about: the unveiling of Jesus' identity as Son of God, as divinity enfleshed, as love incarnate.

Love. In case you've forgotten, for after all, I'm sure the stores are already changing their displays to feature Easter bunnies and egg-shaped chocolates rather than hearts, today is Valentine's Day. Perhaps in some churches, preachers will be explaining the Christian origins of St. Valentine's Day, but I'm actually more interested in this sermon in exploring the secular appropriation of Valentine's Day. Today is the day, above all others, that our society celebrates the gift of love, especially in its romantic form. Which, of course, drives those of us who are single just a bit crazy. But, I for one, rejoice with those who rejoice, for amidst all the sentimentality and consumerism, many find Valentine's Day to be quite special. And it is, if it is about the love between two people, for love shows us that we are created in the image of God. Yet there are those, who while in a loving relationship, find that there is a veil over it, either of their own making or that of society's, that obscures the brilliance of their love. I am speaking about all those couples of the same gender who still struggle to find acceptance in this world.

I grew up in a small Texas town, in a conservative Baptist family. The concept that two people of the same sex could love each other as romantic partners was not something I could even conceive of until I was eighteen. "Gay" was bad. I had never even met an openly gay person until I got to college. Then I met out and proud gay students and professors at my university, and these were good people I respected. I learned a lot about the science and sociology of homosexuality, and I learned that many churches no longer viewed same-sex relationships as sinful. I experienced a change of heart as I realized that gay and lesbian relationships could be just as full of love as heterosexual ones. And yet, I still couldn't quite picture them as being like those of my grandparents, both sets of whom had strong, decades long marriages. Then I met Michael and Kevin,³ parishioners at my church in Houston, partners, and fathers to a little girl they'd adopted. In their mid to late thirties, they weren't as old as my grandparents and, of course, hadn't been partners for nearly as long, but they cared for each other deeply. Michael was diagnosed with cancer, and I had the privilege of serving as the lay Eucharistic visitor who brought communion to their home when he was too ill to come to church. It was there that I saw clearly what had been there all along: a family, two partners in love, one caring for the other as he was sick, both struggling to take care of their daughter amidst all the chaos that severe illness brings to a household. I experienced a moment of transfiguration, that incarnational experience that, in the words of Rev. Fontaine, calls "everyone and everything home to the heart of Love."

What do we do after we have seen these moments of transfiguration? The gospel reading gives us a model. We can't just stay in the glow of epiphany forever. We have to come down from the holy mountain and get back to work in the world, just as Jesus is confronted by a crowd and heals a child immediately after his mountaintop

³ "Michael" and "Kevin" are pseudonyms

experience. What do those of us who have seen the truth that was always there in the love between two people of the same sex do after we have been privileged to be a witness? Last year, my predecessor as seminarian assistant issued a challenge to you all. You had all witnessed her service in the church, grew to admire her leadership, and yet she would not be able to work in this church or any church in the Diocese of Virginia after her ordination because she is partnered to another woman. I am proud to say that this church rose to the challenge, writing a letter to the bishop and sponsoring resolutions at the diocesan annual council that promote full inclusion of lesbian and gay parishioners and clergy in the life of the Diocese of Virginia.⁴ You are witnessing to what you know is true to the rest of the diocese, and I am proud of you and implore you to continue this work.

But we can't stop at the doors of the church. Let us remember this Valentine's Day, originally a church observance of martyrs, that there are thousands of military personnel bravely putting their lives on the line for our country who cannot, at this moment, openly share their love with their partners. If they do, they face discharge. Fortunately, there is hope on the horizon as Congress, the Pentagon, and the White House discuss repealing the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" law. If you have not had a chance to read the congressional testimony of Admiral Mullen, the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I commend it to you. In it, he said, "No matter how I look at the issue, I cannot escape being troubled by the fact that we have in place a policy which forces young men and women to lie about who they are in order to defend their fellow citizens."⁵ In biblical terms, they must wear a veil. By wearing this veil, they are prevented from living their lives with integrity and their fellow servicemembers are kept from experiencing moments of transfiguration as they see the truth of what has always been there.

Should we allow gay clergy, should we bless same-sex unions, should we give gay and lesbian individuals the same rights and privileges as everyone else, in church and in society? These are questions many at home and abroad will say are of minor importance. After all, gay and lesbian people are not systematically persecuted in the United States. Anything more, it would seem to these individuals, is icing on the cake that only a privileged society such as ours can afford to debate. I submit that this is not the way to look at these issues. Instead, we should act boldly to fully embrace our gay sisters and brothers because to do less is to create second-class Christians and citizens. If we equivocate, what message does that send? I agree that we are a privileged church and a privileged society. This is why we can have such conversations and why we must have them, for we must share what we have learned. While systematic persecution is not really an issue in America, it is elsewhere, including within the Anglican Communion. The Anglican Church of Uganda actually favors proposed laws in that country to jail people involved in same-sex relationships.⁶ Fortunately, they stepped back from the initial proposal that would have instituted capital punishment for gays and lesbians, but that is not enough. We must be witnesses to our sisters and brothers in Uganda and around the world.

Not everyone's fully on board with the path I am advocating, even in progressive parishes like this one. I realize that, and I honor that these can be difficult questions that well-meaning people are divided on, especially issues of military readiness and issues that threaten to divide the Body of Christ. But those of us who have been witnesses to the transfiguration, the brilliance, of the love of same-gender couples, must speak and act boldly because these are not questions of minor importance. They are questions of gospel imperative, for Jesus stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that all might come within the reach of his saving embrace.⁷ We need to tell people who have been rejected by their churches and families that there is a place for them where they can know the love of God and neighbor.

Christians, especially Episcopalians, are fond of describing ourselves as Easter people, Resurrection people, and sometimes people of Incarnation. We are also people of Transfiguration. The heart of the Transfiguration is

⁴ http://www.thediocese.net/diocese/annual_council_215.shtml, Resolutions R-3 and R-4

⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/03/us/politics/03military.html>

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/04/world/africa/04uganda.html> and

http://www.episcopalcafe.com/lead/anglican_communion/press_release_from_church_of_u.html#more

⁷ A paraphrase of a prayer for mission from Morning Prayer, the Book of Common Prayer, <http://www.bcponline.org/>

seeing Jesus in the fullness of his identity, human and divine. Likewise, our own moments of transfiguration are about living our lives, and sharing in others lives, with a renewed sense of understanding, truth, and love. As T.S. Eliot writes in "Little Gidding:"⁸

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

As we behold by faith the light of Christ's countenance in all our sisters and brothers, we see them anew. We know them for the first time as they are changed into Christ's image, as though reflected in a mirror, as we all unveil our faces in the freedom of the Spirit and realize that, perhaps, ultimately, sin is about preventing the Christ-light to shine within us. And as we open ourselves up to the all-embracing love of God, we find that we were always beloved, that the Spirit was always with us, "calling everyone and everything home to the heart of love." Amen.

⁸ The last of the Four Quartets, <http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets/gidding.html>