

“Our Real Work”
February 11, 2024

II Corinthians 3:17-4:1
II Corinthians 4:6-7

This Sunday before the beginning of Lent is often observed as “Transfiguration Sunday.” It is a minor day in the church year for Protestants, usually unnoticed by Congregationalists. It is a day on which we hear the Gospel story of Jesus on the mountaintop, his appearance “transfigured” as he shines with the brightness of God’s glory. This is a story of splendor, opening our eyes and our minds to new ways of perceiving and thinking. It gives us a foretaste of the resurrection before Lent.

It is a strange and wonderful story. I’ve read and preached from it over many years on this Sunday before Ash Wednesday—but a while ago I decided not to do so today.

Chris Nakielski, however, had scheduled “Anthem for Transfiguration” for the choir to sing this morning. He was, as one might expect with Chris, very gracious when I told him a couple of weeks ago that this would not be “Transfiguration Sunday.” He pivoted and gave us that wonderful “Caritas”—love abounds in all.

I explained to Chris that I wanted to continue to focus on the mission work of our congregation this week, building on last week’s sermon and the important and well-attended adult education series that the Mission Board has been presenting. Most of you know that since early January, we’ve had a series of guests from some of the Iowa City organizations that we support, helping us to develop closer relationships with them, strengthening and renewing our connections with the CommUnity food bank and Shelter House and United Action for Youth among others.

While our local ministry and mission is important, for some time I’ve been talking with the Mission Board about our congregation developing some partnerships with international organizations or congregations—getting to know people and places much different from what we know here in Iowa City. You know that there is an entire world out there beyond Johnson County—many of you have been there! So, I’ve been pushing the Mission Board to find a few places where we can develop new and significant relationships.

Last year we made a tentative first step toward this when we gave \$2000 to the United Church of Christ’s Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) Empowerment Fund for the support of partners in the region where needed most. This money came from our “Hale Fund” as Charles Hale was a specialist in Latin American History who taught at the University for over 25 years. He and his wife Lenore were very active in this congregation. It was a first step—but so far it has not deepened our connections with Christians in Latin America. As I said last week, money alone does not do the work of creating relationships.

For many decades now we have supported the Theological Education by Extension Program in southern Africa. We made that connection some fifty to sixty years ago when Ed Heininger was the pastor here and his brother was involved with that effort to educate new pastors. Over the years, however, that relationship has weakened although our financial support continues.

The task before us, then, is to create new connections with people, to do something concrete and specific with them. And that is the problem as well.

As I thought about this further in recent weeks, I began to feel overwhelmed. It would have been much easier, I thought to myself, if I had just gone ahead and talked about the transfiguration this morning! But I couldn't very well do that, having asked for a change in the anthem and all.

Here's the thing:

The world beyond Johnson County, beyond our nation is complex, if not chaotic. The needs are great and increasing.

Some in our congregation are tired after a lifetime of trying to address the needs of a hurting world.

Younger members find themselves bewildered—just starting out and not sure of what their commitments are and how they might live them out.

And yet, it is clear that the world—the *people in the world*—need us to join in common ministry with them.

It's not enough for me to stand up here and suggest we get involved with Church World Service or some United Church of Christ international mission partner. The overwhelming needs, the overwhelming challenges make it difficult for one person to say: "Here's what we need to do."

While I want us to develop connections, I don't have the answers.

[Full Stop]

We need to discover our real work. "Our Real Work"—that is both an earnest and ironic title for this sermon.

I took those words from the short poem, "The Real Work" by Wendell Berry.

It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,

and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.

I took the title from that poem and I take hope from it as well. "When we no longer know what to do/we have come to our real work." This morning I want to acknowledge the growing sense that I've had—and what is, I think, our reality as a congregation: that we don't yet see the path forward—but *that is how* we find the path. We are called into those places where we are not sure, where we struggle because we *don't* know. This is the important part of the creative process of discovering what to do next. "When we no longer know which way to go/we have come to our real journey."

And so, as Paul wrote to those early Christians in Corinth: “We do not lose heart.” Now, Paul was quite clear that there were all sorts of reasons *to lose heart*. He said that he was afflicted and perplexed, persecuted and struck down.

The catalogue of human woes that Paul lists continues to be our own. We might use other terms to describe the anxieties and problems that come to us, both simply from the general human condition and because we try to live as Christians.

But Paul does not lose heart. He qualifies each of those experiences. “We are afflicted in every way, *but not crushed*; perplexed *but not driven to despair*; persecuted *but not forsaken*; struck down *but not destroyed*.”

It is not that we are stoically indifferent to adversity. It is that by faith we discover there is a greater power at work in our occasions of bafflement and impediment. This power is, I think, nothing less than the power of God with us in those places of *not* knowing.

To all appearances, Paul was nothing more than an earthen vessel, a cheap clay pot—by extension, so, too, are we. And yet, in Paul’s time precious objects were regularly kept in such pots. So, he tells us that here in our flesh is something of great value.¹

Paul even went so far as to write elsewhere that the human body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Think about that: our bodies as the place where God dwells. In faith we proclaim that God took on human flesh in Jesus. Paul pushes that image and discovers God’s Spirit in each one of us—earthen vessels holding a treasure.

We, the creatures of this earth, find ourselves embraced by the love of the Creator—who brought all things into existence that we—each one of us—might live in love. And this same God calls us to love one another and to love this creation. In some sense, this vast creation was made for us; that in it we might know and share love.

Something like glory—something like the light of God, something like the image of God—fills our lives. That is to say that the Christian life is very much about love.

By the merciful grace of God, we are called to ministry and mission in this complex and chaotic world. To answer that call we have treasure in clay jars—that is in these very fallible and flawed human bodies that we are. The treasure, the gift shows the power of God, not our own ability. These clay pots are vessels containing gifts that are a reflection of God’s glory.

We carry these gifts, we use these gifts, but in a very real sense, we do not possess them. They are, well, gifts.

The treasure that we hold, Paul claims, is “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Each one of us carries this treasure beyond price. Yes, you and I, we’re just clay pots—but what a shining treasure is found inside!

So when we no longer know what to do, when we no longer know which way to go, we do not lose heart.

As we move beyond these walls in ministry and mission, we affirm the good gifts that are present in everybody. When we engage in common ministry with others—whether in Iowa City or far away from here, we must see and call out the gifts in others as much as we share the gifts in ourselves.

When this happens, our gifts and the gifts of others become the mirrors that reflect the glory of God. In the light that comes from God, we see our own gifts, but we also see the gifts in others.

We are standing in this moment, in a liminal time between two places. During these weeks after Epiphany we have stood in the light, we have seen our dependence on the light. In the days ahead we move into Lent and the time beyond that coming season that in not knowing, we might slowly and deliberately discern and discover what it is we as a congregation are called to do.

We listen for what we can do next.

We watch to see where we can go next.

We pause here to take in the glory of God. And we also reflect that glory in our gifts and how we use them.

ⁱ See discussion in Interpretation commentary on II Corinthians.