

Matthew 16:24-17:8
A Mountain Top Experience
March 3, 2019
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

16:24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? 27 "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28 Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

17:1 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

I heard a story about a minister who was visiting with the two adult children of a woman who had recently died. They were gathered in the minister's office talking about her life and, as a way of telling the minister about their mom, began to list the things she in which she was involved.

"She went to her church every Monday and cleaned up the sanctuary," said her daughter. "She used to come home so mad about the messes people left in the pews," said her son.

"Every afternoon she went next door to her neighbors' house to let their dog out," her daughter remembered. "God, she hated that yippy thing," her son chuckled.

"She volunteered at the hospital at least twice a month," her daughter said. "She was sure the germs there would kill her one day," her son said.

"Mom kept beautiful flowerbeds in front of the house," her daughter said with a smile. "She said she only did it so the neighbors wouldn't talk about her behind her back," confided her son.

The minister, after listening to them for a few minutes, asked, "Did your mom do anything she actually enjoyed?"

The woman's son said, "I asked her once why she did all of these things that she clearly did not enjoy." She said, 'We all have our crosses to bear.' To tell you the truth, I think mom thought she wasn't supposed to enjoy her life. I think she thought suffering is what Christians do. Jesus suffered, so his followers should too."

Do you know anyone like that? Someone who seems like, if they aren't in a constant state of suffering or miserable self-sacrificing, they must not be doing it right? I think the first part of today's text is partially to blame for this way of thinking. Jesus' statement, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me, when taken out of context, sounds like an invitation to

embark on a life of misery. I don't think God wants us to be miserable, so, let's set it in context.

This exchange between Jesus and his disciples is part of a conversation that began with Jesus asking the disciples who the people they were encountering were saying he was. Remember, Jesus referred to himself as "the Son of Man." The disciples answered his question, "Some say you are John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" Peter (always willing to blurt out a response) responded, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." This answer must have indicated to Jesus the disciples were "getting it," so he told them that soon he would go to Jerusalem, where he would endure tremendous suffering, be killed, and resurrected. Peter, who had just seconds before confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, told Jesus he was wrong (God, I love Peter). Jesus told Peter to set his mind on divine things and not on human things. So, maybe the disciples weren't quite getting it. It's about true identity.

Next, Jesus explained what following him would really be like. They would have to be willing to deny themselves, even up to and including the humiliation of carrying one's own cross, and they had to be willing to lose everything.

Now, if we stop there, we might think the woman in my story, described by her children, might have had it right. But Jesus said more. He said, "...those who lose their life for my sake will find it." You see, following Jesus isn't just about turning from ourselves and our own tendency to be selfish, but it is about turning toward something greater than ourselves, a greater purpose. Yes, of course there will be suffering, but not just for the sake of suffering. Like, "I hate everything I'm doing, but Jesus promised I would suffer." I can guarantee you, Jesus did not intend for anyone to go looking for ways to be miserable. No, suffering is not the end goal. The end goal (the thing that sometimes requires

suffering and that always requires us turning toward something bigger than and outside of our selves) is bringing about the kingdom of God. This passage tells us that the more of ourselves we give away in service to God, the more we become our true selves, the people we were created to be. It's about true identity.

6 days after Jesus' conversation with his disciples, Jesus, Peter, James, and John went up the mountain. This is the story of the transfiguration. Transfiguration means, "a complete change in form or appearance, into a more beautiful or spiritual state." The story tells us, the disciples witnessed Jesus in a different form, his face glowing, his clothes dazzling white. As Jesus was transfigured, they were joined by Moses and Elijah.

Throughout our look at the Gospel of Matthew, I've been reminding us of the importance the author placed on connecting the story of Jesus to the larger story of Israel. By portraying Moses, Elijah, and Jesus as talking together in a mountaintop scene of transcendent glory, the author confirms his view that Jesus is in continuity with, and the fulfillment of, God's work as represented in the Hebrew Bible. Let's talk for a minute, though, about why specifically Moses and Elijah.

They have a few things in common. In their stories in the Hebrew Bible, they were prophets, who were at first rejected by the people, but vindicated by God, both had mountaintop encounters with God. Moses encountered God first on Sinai, where God spoke to him from a burning bush (Exodus 3). Elijah likewise encountered God on Sinai (called Horeb in 1 Kings 19), where he fled to escape from persecution by the Israelite rulers Ahab and Jezebel. In scripture, a mountaintop is one place God chooses to encounter God's people. The great figures of the Bible meet God on mountains, and Jesus is no exception. Additionally, both Moses and Elijah performed miracles, and both were considered

by first-century Judaism to be transcendent figures who did not die, but were taken directly to heaven. It's about true identity.

And as if that is not enough, a bright cloud overshadowed the mountaintop and from it, the voice of God recalled and confirmed Peter's confession about Jesus' identity, saying "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" It seems like the disciples get it now. Once again, they were so afraid. They fell to the ground. When they looked up from the ground, Jesus stood there alone. They were in the presence of the Holy. It's about true identity.

Matthew wanted his community to be sure that Jesus was who they thought he was. The transfiguration story anticipates the resurrection and the future event when Jesus would come back, giving the reader, through the eyes of the disciples, a glimpse of Matthew's understanding of Jesus' messianic role as the one who would bring all of creation into alignment with God. For Matthew and his Jewish community, the Messiah had come, and soon, the whole world would know it.

Well, that didn't happen, but I wonder, would we recognize Jesus or any reflection of the Holy if he was here today? Are we any better at recognizing God than the disciples were? I'm going to say no. Human beings, even all these years later, still have trouble seeing the "something bigger," even when it's right in front of us. Last weekend, our brothers and sisters in the United Methodist Church gathered to decide whether members of the LGBTQ+ community would be allowed to become ordained ministers and whether their ministers would be allowed to officiate at same sex weddings. In short, they gathered to decide whether people who identify as LGBTQ+ should be fully included in God's church.

One of my friends, who was at the gathering, said the waiting was awful, waiting for a them to decide who was in and who was out. I found the whole thing offensive (as did she). And to be fair and honest, I found it just as offensive when our own denomination had the same discussion in Orlando at the 2013 General Assembly, where we overwhelmingly adopted this resolution:

The General Assembly calls upon the Church to recognize itself as striving to become a people of grace and welcome to all God's children though differing in sexual orientation or gender identity, affirming that neither are grounds for exclusion from fellowship or service within the church, and calling upon all expressions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), as a people of grace and welcome, to acknowledge their support for the welcome of and hospitality to all.

I find it offensive anytime we arrogantly believe we have the right to exclude anyone, let alone an entire group of people. And I believe the root of the problem is our inability to recognize the Holy, in our world and in one another, even when we are face to face. I am so disappointed in the decision reached by the UMC. I'm disappointed in individual Disciples churches that get it wrong too. And I am so disappointed that we are still having this conversation. When will we recognize the glory of God in our brothers and sisters? And, I wonder, what kind of a mountaintop experience is needed for us to get it?

Our passage today is about identity. It is about who Jesus was and who we are really, as his followers? We are called to do whatever it takes to bring about the kin-dom of God, to bring about wholeness in a fragmented world. And I promise you, we will never be whole until everyone is included. Our churches must give up worshipping the Bible and loving our buildings and our doctrines more than we love our God and the ones our God created. And we must do it today.

I'm grateful for this community and for your faithfulness to God's call to love and fully include everyone. I will end this morning with a poem written by Dr. Sharon Fennema, Assistant Professor of Christian Worship at the Pacific School of Religion.

It's called "Of Dazzling Mystery and Radiant Love" and reminds us to look for the Holy in everyone, everywhere.

She writes: For my UMC siblings and dear ones

in these days of fracturing and crumbling
when it feels like the sun has gone dark
and no stone is left on stones,
when it seems there is nothing but ashes
a few days early
perhaps the mystery of transfiguration
is not in dazzling whiteness or blinding brightness
not in the declaration of divinity or a vision of prophecy fulfilled
maybe this mountaintop was really about
the way that light scatters
u n c o n t a i n e d
through every crack and crevice
through the prism of every tear
every tear in the fabric of community
maybe it is the affirmation
that every face sings
g l o r y
if we are awake enough
to behold it
maybe it is the painful reminder
that there is no dwelling
(no sanctuary, no denomination, no ideology)
that can hold the vision of a world transfigured by dazzling love
because that vision is meant

for the road
for the journey
for the departing
and going down into the valleys
maybe this mountaintop is about
God's insistent voice
calling out from the clouds of fear and hate
to each one of us
beloved
chosen
child of God
imploring us to listen
for the glory revealed
in what we do not understand
and cannot accept
waiting for us to be transfigured
by this dazzling mystery
this radiant love

Amen.