

Transfiguration — Transformation
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 99
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 17:1-9

The German theologian, Karl Barth, is remembered as one of the most significant minds of the 20th Century. His multi-volume, exhaustive theological opus, entitled *Church Dogmatics*, remains as core reading for anyone who studies theology; his name lifted up alongside Augustine, Luther, and Calvin as seminal voices for Christ's church. Yet, in a newspaper profile in 1955, Barth was quoted saying, "I have to confess that if I ever get to heaven, I would first of all seek out Mozart and only then inquire after Augustine, St. Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and Schleiermacher."

It may seem a bit odd that an eminent scholar theologian would choose a musician/composer, even one as brilliant as Mozart, to be the first person he'd want to break bread with in heaven. Even if musicians were his only choice, you might assume a theologian would choose Bach or Handel, whose music was more intentionally theological and often specifically composed for the church. Why Mozart? Well, it stems from an early childhood experience that would influence Barth's theology for the rest of his life.

Like Karl, his father Fritz was also a pastor and teacher. In addition, Fritz loved music and played the piano. Theologian Andrew Root reports, “When Karl was five or six, Fritz started playing, for no particular reason, something by Mozart. Those first notes were like a flash of lightning hitting little Karl straight in the chest.” Reflecting on this moment late in his life, Barth said, “I can still picture the scene. He began a couple of bars from [Mozart’s opera] *The Magic Flute*. They went right through me and into me, I don’t know how, and I thought, ‘That’s it!’” Five-year-old Karl Barth heard Mozart’s composition and he proclaimed “That’s it!”

Root observes that Barth’s “five-year-old self doesn’t make the statement as a solution to an equation. Nor is he searching for personal answers, trying to catalogue his favorite music. ‘That’s it!’ isn’t a reference even to a preference. He’s too small for that. He isn’t thinking, ‘That’s it, that’s my favorite music, that’s what I’ll build my identity around. I’ll put all Mozart’s posters on my wall ... and buy some old concert tees on eBay’ ... Those bars of *The Magic Flute* went right through little Barth, going into his very being.” Even as a five-year-old, Barth was certain he’d encountered something real, as if in a moment of time everything came into fullness all at once. “The music vibrated the being of Barth’s five-year-old self and he

felt full.” Root suggests there was something beyond emotion going on here. It was something deeper. “Listening to those bars, little Barth was overcome with affection. This affection was not directed toward himself (it went through him!), nor was it directed toward Mozart (as if he was swept away by celebrity). Rather, the affection that came over him, going through him — even as a five-year-old — was a love for the world.” (Andrew Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*)

It was one of those encounters, a eureka moment, when your very being is met by something beyond you, and you know that from that point forward you are changed and will never see your world the same. You realize that, previously, your view of the world was far too small. It’s not a moment you can plan, organize, schedule, manipulate, or control. It surprises you, not waiting for an invitation, breaking into your being without permission or warning ... and you are transformed by the encounter.

Worshipping in Florida last Sunday, I witnessed a baptism. It mirrored the celebration of baptism we shared here today, loving parents standing before the congregation to affirm God’s claim on their child and covenant

with a congregation to nurture that child in Christ's love. Elegant clothes, everyone wearing their culturally approved and publicly mandated smiles as they move through the historic baptismal liturgy.

The child being baptized has an older sister, perhaps 3-years-old; a beautiful little girl, lovely curls, and I was told she has been swimming through the shoals of special needs throughout her brief life. Beneath all the smiles, there was probably the emotional weariness and physical fatigue resulting from the unrelenting toil of a life consumed with the care of an infant in addition to a child with special needs, not to mention the energy-sapping effort just to get everybody dressed and to church on time.

The church's educator, who happens to be a friend of Rebecca and Lindsey, has been personally working with the family to ensure that the older sister feels at home in the church family. You could see her there with the family before worship, and assisting them as they moved the family ship into the harbor of the sanctuary's chancel.

Well, the baptism went swimmingly, no pun intended, but before the associate pastor handed the baby back to the family, she knelt down and intentionally asked the older sister if she wanted to walk with her and the

baby down the center aisle, and without hesitation, the sister joined them, much to the surprise of those close to her. She went freely and comfortably as if it was the most natural thing to do.

Well, as the perfectly poised, elegantly outfitted mom observed this ... her cheeks were suddenly being baptized with a flow of beatific radiant tears, not because everything was camera perfect, but in acknowledgement of the transcendence of the moment. The holy had escaped the realm of heaven and descended into that space, into that moment, and its presence could be described with one word - home. What is John's vision in Revelation? "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them."

Like Karl Barth's gobsmacked encounter with Mozart, it was a "That's it!" moment. Heaven and earth, all creation, time, history, and hope are compressed into a single unit measured by fullness and by love; and not just a love for something or someone, but a love for all things and for life itself, everything crystallized in goodness. Some life events lend themselves to such an experience - a birth, a baptism, the metaphorical and sometimes

literal mountaintop experience of a youth retreat, an engagement, a reunion, a reconciliation, a second chance - all moments described best, not as happiness, but fullness, wholeness, goodness. That moment when all creation comes together like the envelope address in a Thornton Wilder play. Do you recall the letter Jane Crofut received from her pastor when she was sick? “Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America ... Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God.” Moments of singularity.

“Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.”

Google Transfiguration art and see how artists through the ages have attempted to characterize that which cannot be characterized. Glorious works worth untold millions, but even Raphael falls short in revealing what happened on that mountain. Jesus, in all his heavenly glory, there standing

with history's two greatest mountain climbers - Moses and Elijah (with apologies to Sir Edmund Hilary and Tenzing Norgay).

Where was Moses when he spied the burning bush? Where was Elijah when he heard the still small voice? On a mountain. In scripture, the mountain often represents those moments when heaven and earth overlap: the realm of God and the realm of God's creation. Moses, Elijah, Jesus — The deliverance of God, the voice of God, our redemption by God. What does Paul say? "All things work together for good." Isn't that the image God is offering to the executive committee of his disciples there on the mountain? Isn't that the message Matthew has for his church in a fractious and perilous age? Isn't that what is confirmed in those singular moments of fullness and wholeness that surprise us, flooding us with a sense of love, goodness, and grace?

Now, Peter's reaction to this meeting of heaven and earth, is treated by Matthew simply as a distraction, thus unacknowledged by the leading actors in this scene. Peter ... bless him, Lord. Peter is like the dude on the beach at sunset, clamoring for everyone's attention, organizing their bodies into the best position for the perfect photo, which just means everyone misses the

sunset because they are facing away from it. But let's face it, we are Peter, intent on organizing the life right out of life. We perceive the onset of the holy, and instead of experiencing it, we get busy trying to shrink-wrap and package it. We assign it to the proper committee to pick out the flaws before putting it on the calendar for next year.

In a way, I guess you could say the Transfiguration is God quoting Ferris Bueller, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it." The Transfiguration is the Lord's call to attentiveness, to the practice of listening for the holy in the ordinary of our days, watching for the incursion of the sacred onto our paths. Matthew reports that while Peter was still speaking (which is just another sign that we can't manage or package the holy) "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!"

Though Paul is speaking of our resurrection when he says, "*we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye*", the same may be said of our encounters with the holy in this life. "*We will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.*"

Throughout life we are graced with and changed by holy moments that surprise us with the fullness and wholeness of life with God and love for all God has made.

I may have been three states removed from North Carolina last Sunday, but it didn't take long for the message to arrive that my position here is in jeopardy. It's okay, it's a message I get every year in the wake of Youth Sunday. "These kids are going to take your place." To which I say, yeah, that's kind of the plan, God's marvelous and mysterious design for creation. They are supposed to take my place, and though it may be hard for you fathom, they are supposed to take your place, too.

If today is Transfiguration Sunday, last Sunday could be called Transformation Sunday, and what a glorious Sunday it was as our Youth guided us on a hike to that mountaintop where God's presence is confirmed. Messages highlighting the steadfast love of God and the nurture of the community of faith; music sending our hearts heavenward; words and prayers through which the Spirit of God opened our eyes and pointed to signs that God has shown up and taken up residence here.

Yes, this group of seniors holds special meaning for me. As Joanna Alford reported, she was the first child born after my arrival here. I baptized her over in Mecklenburg Hall when that was our worship space. Throughout my days here, her mother has praised God with her clear soprano voice, taught children in our preschool, and walked to fight hunger. And her father, for 18 $\frac{1}{2}$, years, has steadfastly assisted in the impossible task of making my voice heard, if not intelligible. Their lives have been invested in this place, and yes, it's a bit daunting to realize the infant you held in your arms is now taller than you. Of course, one thing you have to say about these students is that while the pandemic may have put a pause on their education, it did nothing to slow their growth. Holy cow! When I look up at them, which is the only way for me to see them, I feel like the blind man when Jesus was helping him to see again, "They look like trees walking." No doubt.

Yet, last Sunday we were witnesses to the truth that transformation is not just about size, it's about the confirmation of what we hoped for at their baptism, it's about the gifts of God being revealed through them. And hearing your reactions to their wise words, grateful hearts, and voices full of praise, it is obvious, that in that holy moment, you too, were transformed by

a vision of the fullness of God and God's kingdom. Such moments are precious, and it is our task to remind one another that these holy moments are not as rare as we think, if only we are paying attention.

Such moments feed us and sustain us for the days ahead, reminding us yet again that no matter what we may face, no matter where we go, we have a home with God. I don't know if Jesus even heard Peter's capital campaign proposal that day, but I know Jesus felt it important for Peter to be present for this moment and for Peter to hold this moment close to his heart, for in time Peter too, would be transformed by the Spirit of God.

On that mountain something just as important as the vision of God's holiness shining through Jesus would take place. Seeing Peter's fear, Jesus touched him, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." Isn't that the message those beatific, holy moments provide for us?

I didn't inherit my mother's musical talent, just her love for music, and some semblance of what Karl Barth encountered with Mozart is what I experience in the hearing of many varieties of music. It's not so much love for an artist as it is a revelation of life abundant. I'll admit it, I wept for joy at a Count Basie concert and have often been literally choked with fullness

in the singing of a hymn. There's a Stephen Paulus anthem that gets me every time I hear it - ethereal harmonization, potent message. Its lyric conveys the takeaway of our encounters with Transfiguration, the message Jesus imparted to Peter, James, and John.

Rise up, follow me
Come away, is the call
With the love in your heart
As the only song
There is no such beauty
As where you belong
Rise up, follow me
I will lead you home

So, pay attention, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it." Amen.