

SERMON FOR YEAR C, FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

LUKE 4:29-43A

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"INTIMATE"

What we've just heard has been grounds over the years
For the endless speculation of the faithful.
I myself have had several opportunities at this point to preach on the Transfiguration,
And anticipate many more.

Can I share a secret with you?
The Bible is a like a kaleidoscope to me,
And every time I put my eye up to it, every time I approach it with intention,
I see the same elements inside of it that are always there,
Only they're arranging themselves in a fresh way.

There are probably only two or three main themes in all of Holy Scripture,
And there they are, on virtually every page,
Lining up and reflecting on each other in a way that suggests to me
That I had better wake up and pay new attention and not get lazy.

The Transfiguration, of course, is no different.
I approached it earlier this past week thinking, honestly, that it would be the same old thing;
But as I lived my life, all the elements of the picture rearranged themselves,
And I was stunned once again by how good God is to us,
That we should be taught so patiently, in a new way each time.

So here it is. At least for me.

There is no growth in Christ

Without a deepening, evolving relationship, at the heart level, with Christ.

Now, believe me, I am certainly not happy with that whole Jesus-is-your-boyfriend theology
That I'm seeing on Christian television and elsewhere.
But clearly God does seek relationship with God's people;
God longs to be known by you, as much as to *know* you;
And as Christians, Jesus of Nazareth is our particular way of knowing God.

What I see happening on the mountaintop is this:
A man who is perfectly well known as a man takes his three closest associates aside,
And he shows them who else he is; what else he is;
He gives them a good deal of the rest of the story –
Not to show his power, but only to show *himself* in an undefended way.

And maybe it's just because today is Valentine's Day,
But I think he does so precisely because he wants to be *known*; he longs for intimacy.
He longs to have relationships of deep mutuality and common understanding,
And he knows that he cannot unless he is honest about who he is.

I say all these things perfectly aware that they might put me on some sort of heretical footing.
My more theologically and biblically minded friends might read this sermon
And want to get on a plane and come to Sioux City
Just so that they could slap me around with their Bibles.
It doesn't occur to me that I should care much.

When I imagine the mountaintop, I see a Jesus
Whose goal it is to *establish intimacy* with the human family.

And that intimacy – that desire of God to draw us in – it didn't come cheap,
And it still doesn't to this day.
It was based on a love that was put to the ultimate test:
To become manifest in a person who had a message
Of healing and reconciliation and forgiveness,
And who, with a few notable exceptions, was largely dismissed, and finally murdered.

That, brothers and sisters, is putting the love of God to the test!
The Bible shows me a Creator who would do *anything* for the creation;
The Bible shows me a Knower who would do *anything* to be known.
We'd ought to realize, as Moses was taught, that anywhere we are is fair game
For us to be in the presence of a God who uses everything possible to reach out to us.

And I'm very sorry to say so, but if even if we never miss church our whole lives,
And even if we memorize the teachings of the church,
And even if we try to be good people ...
That's only formation in the law.
(Please understand that I'm speaking to myself!)
Meanwhile, God is using everything to try to get our attention, and become known,
Because intimacy is mutual and a two-way street.

A lot of us are waiting for epiphanies;
A lot of us are standing at the top of the mountain,
Waiting for Jesus to show up and be dazzling white.
We think that as soon as we have some big experience like that,
Then our spiritual journeys will have begun in earnest,
But until Jesus shows up, I'm not truly obligated, except as to be formed in the law.

When in fact,
The Transfiguration is not a one-time event.
It's happening all the time,
And God will use any little thing –
Any detail, any conversation, any person, any relationship, *any* thing –
To convert us into deeper intimacy and trust and mutuality and respect and love.

Last week, I was struck when I was listening to a CD of a talk given by Fr. Richard Rohr.
He's speaking of the Eucharist, and he says,
“When there's someone you love, you cannot get close enough to them.”

It's so true, isn't it?
And not just in the winter time in the Midwest!
You cannot get close enough to someone you love.

In Mark, Jesus is asked about divorce, and instead of unfolding the law,
He repeats the teaching from Genesis about marriage:
The two are no longer two, but one flesh.
You hear a longing in that teaching
That connects Jesus to Adam –
Looking at this creation, looking at us and saying,
This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh;
This creation, this people, is my bride.

You hear it in Paul, writing with great glee to the church in Galatia, saying,
“Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.
I have been crucified with Christ; and *it is no longer I who live,*
But it is Christ who lives in me.
And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God,
Who loved me and gave himself for me.”

I love being an Episcopalian,
And I love being able to bring an intellectual component to my life of faith,
And I stopped apologizing for that a long time ago.
I am not ashamed that my faith includes what goes on in my head;
Neither should you be.

But remember this, too:
Before we can ever really know anyone,
Before there can be any intimacy at all,
Our *hearts* must be open to one another, and undefended.

Forget about anything else.
When you open up your heart, you love, and you *know* love.
You know the other, and the other knows you;
And you have deep peace,
Because you know that everything's going to be okay,
And everything's going to flow from that love and that okay-ness.

Open up to *that* today, sisters and brothers, and the rest will follow on.

Amen!