

## "The Beloved Community: How We Reconcile"

Mark 9:2-9

February 11, 2018

In the following passage from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 9, verses 2-9, Jesus has just finished telling the disciples that some of them would be very lucky to see "the kingdom of God arrive into the world in full force." The disciples are just now beginning to pick up on the reality that their travels with Jesus will be no ordinary journey. They will be called upon to reconcile the pre-Messianic ways of being God's people with the new covenant, a time of radical peace and justice reshaping the meaning and mission of faith. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church:

*Six days later, three of them did see it. Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. His clothes shimmered, glistening white, whiter than any bleach could make them. Elijah, along with Moses, came into view, in deep conversation with Jesus.*

*Peter interrupted, "Rabbi, this is a great moment! Let's build three memorials—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah." He blurted this out without thinking, stunned as they all were by what they were seeing.*

*Just then a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and from deep in the cloud, a voice: "This is my Son, marked by my love. Listen to him."*

*The next minute the disciples were looking around, rubbing their eyes, seeing nothing but Jesus, only Jesus.*

*Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy. "Don't tell a soul what you saw. After the Son of Man rises from the dead, you're free to talk." They puzzled over that, wondering what on earth "rising from the dead" meant.*

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I came across recently an old black and white family photo dating back to 1963 or so. It's a picture of my little twin sisters, Dana and Dawn. In this photograph, they are both wearing their cute little sundresses, bobby socks, and Sunday shoes. They are about two years old. You have met my twin sisters here at church on many occasions.

When I say they were both wearing their sundresses, white socks, and Sunday shoes, I am really just guessing. This picture was taken by our mom, I remember, just after the twins had emerged from playing in the sandbox in the mud and they are covered head to toe in dirt, grime, and caked-on mud. They sport wide-eyed grins and pure joy.

I remember this day. I was supposed to be watching Dawn and Dana before we left for church. As they were wont to do, they had their own ideas of how to busy themselves as my parents had finished dressing them and were now readying themselves. I was normally quite responsible about watching my little sisters, but I was distracted somehow, and they slipped outside without me noticing them.

I heard the ruckus outside, the sounds of glee coming from the both of them. I looked out the side room picture window in horror, seeing mud flying everywhere and what looked like two little white clouds throwing the wet dirt at each other, sliming it all over their dresses and their hair, and their feet slashing mud all over the place. I

knew I would be blamed, as this rules infraction, this breach of all decorum, this anarchy, took place on my watch.

I was *furious!* Now, you have to understand that I am, and at heart always have been, a rule follower. I generally stop for yellow traffic lights. I pick up after where my dogs leave off immediately after the act. I re-sort the trash to make sure the recyclables are in their place and the non-recyclable trash is in theirs. I pay my taxes on time, and I love my Jesus.

And my sisters, well they are rule-followers, too now, but it took me to whip them into shape as youngsters. For example, I would make them practice the Pledge of Allegiance, *while marching*, over and over until at last, they would both get it right, or I would just give up and live to try another day. We laugh about it now. I was their watchtower sister.

So, when I reported to my mother that they had committed this terrible sin in the mud on a Sunday morning before church, I was sure she would explode in anger at me and at them. Instead, she grabbed the Polaroid camera, went outside, and snapped the shot of them caught in the act. And then she started laughing. My mom had a real, honest-to-goodness, and very uncharacteristic, belly laugh. I didn't know how to reconcile the scene before me. So, I laughed, too, and it felt real good.

Margaret Wheatley wrote this: "It's not our differences that divide us. It's our judgments about each other that do." When I think about Mark's gospel story of the Transfiguration of Jesus into the Christ, I think of the way we judge all events that unfold before us. I think of the events and I think about the people of those events. It is natural for us to judge the stories that play out before us and the people who serve as the centerpieces of the stories we carry around in our hearts.

Who is our hero? Who do we blame? Who speaks God's truth and who bastardizes it? We make these judgments all the time; we need to feel we are on the right side, the *clean* side of the controversy, the Tidy Whitey clean side of the Christian life. But is there such a thing, really?

My sisters found pure joy in the dirt and mud. They slathered it all over them, careless about convention or consequence. I was the one all stressed out, because I took it on myself to be the *responsible* child, the family hero, the *clean* one of the clan. Sometimes, I think, Christendom would be better served by a whole lot more of us slogging around willingly, gleefully, in the mud, and a whole lot less of us standing around on the safe perimeter of where the fun and action is, keeping our shoes nice and clean.

In the story of the Transfiguration of Christ, three of his followers are allowed into the mud patch on a day like no other in their

lives. They are allowed in to the wonderment that comes with the unexplainable. They are allowed to watch with jaws wide open as Jesus becomes something totally unexpected, totally unexplained, totally blinding-light-white right before their eyes. And then, then all the magic is gone, in just a flash. Jesus chides Peter when he tries to put words to the experience, and then he tells them all to keep it all secret.

"Don't tell a soul what you just saw," he tells them. Yeah, right. They walk back down the mountain, the four of them, and the incident is *never* again mentioned in the Gospel, though it is told in slightly different fashion in both Matthew and Luke. The story lives on, we know, because it is written of in the first century in 2 Peter, written in the voice of Simon Peter by an early church leader, but it is *never again* commented on by any of the Gospel writers.

How do we reconcile the telling of this important story? How do we reconcile that only a few of the disciples got to witness the Transfiguration, and that none of the other dedicated followers of Jesus ever during his lifetime were allowed to hear about it? How fair is that? How does keeping this ultimate truth secret build the kingdom of God?

*"It's not our differences that divide us. It's our judgments about each other that do."* Last week we thought about how we can disagree and still remain the Beloved Community. Today, we are asked to hear

and believe a story that sets Jesus apart from every other person we have ever known or learned of, but we are privy to a secret that those closest to him were denied from knowing. How do we reconcile being "in the know" and keeping others "in the dark" about the good news? Why do we get to roll around like little piggies in the mudhole while others wring their hands on the sidelines concerned about the consequences of our Spirit-play?

This story tells us to be the non-anxious presence in all the sea of conflict, whether the conflict swirls around us or within us. This story says some days are the days where you are led inside to a fabulous and brilliant insight. Somedays you are Simon Peter, James, and John and you are enlightened, and somedays you are the nameless, faceless rest of the world and you are left to wonder. That's how it is in God's world. That's how it is living in the story of Christ. That's how the Spirit of God works.

And sometimes, sometimes, the dissenting voice in the room may be the very one we need to heed, because it just may be the very voice the Spirit is speaking through that day.

We don't need to keep our Sunday clothes pure white, clean, free of lint, free of dog hair, or free of mud. We don't need to keep the pages of our personal Bibles crisp and unbent, free of stray musings, free of question marks, or free of our soul's wanderings. We don't

need to keep our church all one theology, all one political party, or all one way of experiencing the Holy.

Christianity is best practiced in the *mud*, brothers and sisters. My little brat sisters understood that in a very primal way that Sunday morning. My mother got it, too. I was the one who overthought the experience, *judged* the unholy grievance against the Lord's Sabbath. I was the one who refused to try to reconcile their Spirit-play with my rule-following rigidity. Now that I think back on it, they did have their Sunday School experience that day. And now when I think back on my youth growing up in my rule-following, proper theologizing, proper liturgizing church, I probably could have used a whole lot fewer days judging myself and judging others, and a whole lot more days rolling around in the mud in my Sunday-go-to-worship clothes.

*May It Be So.*