

February 19th, 2023

Matthew 17:1-9 “Don’t Let Them Pull You Down”

Good morning. Officially speaking, this is “Week of Compassion” although I’d argue that *every* week in the church ought to be a week of compassion. But today and next Sunday we are dedicating some time to recognizing and showing support for Week of Compassion which is our denomination’s global disaster relief ministry. As you might imagine, they’ve been very busy lately. It’s also the last Sunday before Lent! I was looking through our worship supply closets last week and I came across these Mardi Gras beads that Katy Valentine used for a children’s moment almost a decade ago if you can believe it. I thought about wearing them this morning, but I thought, “Nah. That was her thing being from Louisiana and everything.” In addition to being Week of Compassion and the last Sunday before Lent, it’s Transfiguration Sunday too. What that means is that no matter what year we are in the lectionary, we’re either focused on Moses receiving the ten commandments on Mt. Sinai, or Jesus’s transfiguration on Mt. Tabor.

But wait, there’s more! We’ve also been dealing with the subject of what it takes to develop a deep Christian Spirituality. We’ve learned that it involves opening up space in our minds, hearts and bodies. Developing a spiritual life is also an ongoing process of surrendering our will so that God’s will can be done. And that takes work. It takes practice. It’s not easy. And it’s not a “one and done” thing either. It’s an ongoing journey that follows us from the time we come to faith until the time we die. But we humans are so “destination-minded” that we try to come up with shortcuts and substitutes for surrendering. Again, it’s work.

So what does this week’s scripture have to do with developing deep spirituality? What can we learn from this story about Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration that will help us be “more spiritual?” Well for one thing, can you think of a more spiritual experience than climbing a mountain with Jesus, seeing him transformed to the point where he is

shining like the sun all the while chatting with Moses and Elijah. Then to top it all off, God's voice comes out of a luminous cloud and says, "This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Wow! So *this* is the payoff for all that heart, mind, and body work? *This* is what you get when you truly surrender? Hey, I'm all in. Worth it for sure! But then Peter speaks up which is no surprise and basically says, "What a great place! Listen, if you'd like, I'll build three tents here – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah! And we can just stay here and bask in God's glory every day!" But Jesus had other plans. He rejected that idea and took them back down the mountain to resume their ministry among the poor and the sick and the lost. He also told them that they couldn't say anything about their experience until after he was raised from the dead. Okay, that's a bit of a bummer because they weren't sure when that would happen, but still ... wow! And what's great is that the only people who got to be there with him were Peter, James, and John. It had already been established that they were his closest disciples already, but they must have felt extra special when Jesus said, "Tell no one of this vision." Not even the other 9 apostles? Nope. This time was for us.

Ever read a story like this from the Bible and think, "Why doesn't stuff like this happen to *me*?" And maybe you know someone who *has* had a big "signs and wonders" spiritual experience and you think, "Whoa. I wonder if this is how the other apostles felt when Peter, James, and John told them about their experience after the resurrection?" "Geez James, what made you all so special?" While we're on that topic, do you ever feel less than special or maybe less than spiritual when you hear about someone who's *had* a vision or a face-to-face encounter with the divine? And you say, "What's wrong with me?" And then the person who had the miraculous vision says, "I don't know, what *is* wrong with you?" Which sounds kind of rude, I know, but it happens.

Spiritual one-upmanship is a thing. And it's tragically amusing. There's something almost entertaining about listening to a group of people telling stories in order to convince others that they've had the most

spiritual experience in the group. Or worse, that they're the *most spiritual person* in the group. "Well, I was 16 the first time I spoke in tongues." Then someone else says, "Really? That's interesting. I was 10." Then there's always the joker in the group who says, "Well I came into this world screaming in tongues after the doctor smacked me on the bum." Not that I'm ever "that person" in the group or have actually said that out loud. And maybe these little brags aren't related to "signs and wonders" so much. Maybe they're more subtle. Maybe it's someone who brings a giant bible to church with every word highlighted in a different color with those little sticky-note page markers and hand-written notes in the margins. And maybe they throw out the occasional "humble brag" like, "I know that I fall short in my daily devotion time so I'm going to set a goal for studying scripture for an hour a day instead of just a half hour." To which someone will say, "Oh, I remember when I reached that goal when I was a baby Christian. I get up at 5:00 AM and read an hour for my morning devotions and read an hour in the evening before I go to bed."

Sometimes it's not an individual who engages in this kind of subtle "spirit shaming." Some churches want to make sure that everyone feels that they're never good enough in their pursuit of spiritual experiences. I know of some churches who make having a miraculous spiritual experience a requirement in order to be considered for a leadership position. I knew a guy once who was approached about being a deacon in his church. He felt honored and said, "Yes." But then he was asked if he'd ever been slain in the spirit, which for those of you unfamiliar with that term, is basically being possessed by the Holy Spirit to the point of losing consciousness. He said, "Ummm no." Then he was asked if he'd ever spoken in tongues. "No." Interpreted tongues? "No." Have you ever been moved by the Holy Spirit at all? "Well, I think the Spirit guides me in a lot of decisions that I've made." Yes, but have you ever manifested the Spirit in a miraculous way? "I don't know." Then he was told that until he had a genuine visible manifestation of the Holy Spirit, he could not serve the church. I asked him how that made him feel and he said, "I don't know. Do you think I should fake it?" And if

someone has to ask that question, there's a problem. "Should I fake it so others will think I'm spiritual and accept me" should never cross the mind of a person who follows Jesus.

When I was in high school I had friends who went to a church like this. After I was baptized, which was at a different church, they said, "Okay, you've been baptized in water, but were you baptized in the Spirit?" I said, "Well I guess ... I mean it was the Spirit that led me to make the decision to follow Christ in the first place." They said, "No, you've got to be baptized in the Spirit too." Well how do you know when that happens? "You speak in tongues." Oh. Okay. I was about ready to dismiss myself from this already uncomfortable conversation when one of my friends said, "Well, let's pray and ask God to baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Wait, what? "Yes, let's pray right now for God to show us a sign that you've been baptized by the Holy Spirit." By that time I was so dumbstruck I didn't know what to say. So these three friends of mine circled around me, laid hands on me and started to pray that the Lord would bless me with the gift of tongues. This was back in the day when Nancy Reagan was telling kids to "just say no" when someone tried to pressure you into smoking pot ... which was what this felt like to me. So I took Nancy's advice. I said, "No thank you" and walked away.

Why do we have this kind of anxiety when it comes to spiritual matters? Why do we think we have to measure up to a particular standard? Is it because we're afraid of missing out on something? And why do we feel like we've got to brag when we have special moments where God's presence manifests in out-of-the-ordinary ways? I'm not saying that these experiences don't happen. I believe they do. But when the bragging starts? That's awkward. It's like we're a little kid trying to prove to our siblings that "Dad loves me best." Well of course God loves everybody. God so loved the world that God sent God's only son. But God loves me better because maybe I put in a little more work into my spiritual practice than everyone else. Maybe I love God more than some of my other friends. And maybe God gives me a few more perks

when it comes to experiencing the miraculous because I *am* more special ... because I *do* work harder.

But then you've got the person who tries so hard and prays so hard and wants to have a particular spiritual experience so badly that they try to barter with God. You know, "If you just let me see one little miracle, if you just let me experience this great inner peace, if you just show me even a little sign that you're listening and that you're real I'll do everything I can to serve you." That just doesn't sound like deep Christian spirituality to me at all.

As we've said over the last few weeks, the key to developing a deep spirituality is letting go. Okay, but what does "letting go" have to do with having the desire to have a spiritual experience? Isn't that what we're aiming for when we discipline ourselves to focus on being more engaged with God? I think the "letting go" part of our spiritual practice involves letting go of our expectations of what we think a spiritual experiences ought to be. There are many different ways to have spiritual experiences. But if we're only focused on the ones that we *think* we should have, or the ones we believe we're entitled to, we're going to miss out on so many others that are unexpected. Ones that we otherwise wouldn't even classify as "genuinely" spiritual in nature. Let go. Be open to the unexpected. When you do this, you might be surprised at how often God manifests in your life.

Benediction –

Walk in light and truth.

See the light of Christ in every face.

Be the light of Christ to all you meet. Amen.