

## Transfiguration

March 2, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Michael Solberg

*Texts: Luke 9: 23-25, 28-36*

I'm feeling it, right there along with you. While we rightly manifest joy and beauty and love and hope when we come together in worship, with vibrant singing, bold words of forgiveness, the powerful creation of belonging as we offer each other the peace of Christ, with all of that, I am hearing more and more that this time, in this place, within these walls, and among these people, this all feels more and more like a wedding celebration in a war zone. People will make time for joy and love and belonging, but the war still rages outside. Perhaps we also fear, though, that a more honest analogy is the ballroom of the Titanic, with the band playing on as the waters swallowed the ship.

As if all the global concerns we have been worrying about for years or decades weren't enough - nuclear weapons, climate change, ever escalating inequality, pernicious white supremacy culture - as if all that weren't enough, now we have the leader of our country acting like a child - no, that's not fair to children - acting like a spoiled, insecure teenager - no that's not fair to teenagers - acting like a megalomaniacal mob boss - no, that's not fair to mob bosses - acting like a demagogue - no that's fair to demagogue - acting like a, well, you get the idea - a president who is pursuing policies that for all the world look like they are going to worsen the big problems of this world, not lessen them, and create new ones as a bonus.

If you see this moment differently, that's okay. I love and respect you, my sibling in Christ. But this is what I am feeling, and I imagine I have some company. It's a difficult time.

And in that important sense, this moment parallels what's going on as the passage I read earlier from Luke unfolds. Just before we hear of the mystery of Jesus' transfiguration, the revelation of his radiance, it was a difficult time. Jesus asked his disciples: "Who do people think I am?" They fill Jesus in on the celebrity gossip of the day - some say you are John the Baptist, some say Elijah, some are thinking more along the lines of Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.

Then Jesus confronts them with a far more personal question: "Who do you think I am?" Peter, who makes yet another appearance as the guy with the silver tongue, declares "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus, however, takes what could have been a lovely moment, this confession of living faith, and turns it into a dark and difficult day by telling his followers the second worst thing he could possibly tell them: "I must go to Jerusalem and suffer at the hands of the religious and political power brokers. They will execute me..." He does then mention the resurrection, but on the heels of a word like execution, I doubt that landed much at all.

And to make matters worse Jesus continues with the first worst thing he could possibly say - not only he, but they must suffer these things: "If anyone wishes to be my follower, let them deny their self and take up their cross each day, and let them follow me. For whoever has the goal of saving their soul on their own will lose it; but whosoever loses their soul for my sake, this one will save it."

We must forget ourselves, carry the cross daily, and follow him. That's the core challenge of Christianity. It must have been a serious blow that day to the disciples. Here they thought they had hooked up with the one who was going to ride triumphantly into Jerusalem, and militarily or miraculously rout the Romans and restore Israel to its rightful place on top of the world. They had high hopes indeed about what Jesus would do, and about their role in the victory.

But then came those words: "You must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me." Perhaps the disciples were confused, or heartbroken, or maybe they even felt betrayed. "Hey, Jesus, that's not what we signed up for. We were more into the popular, successful side of Christianity, not the whole suffering, dying, forgetting-of-self side." It's not surprising that after a similar teaching in the Gospel of John it says that because of this, many of Jesus followers turned back and would not follow him anymore.

Of course, if we are honest, I think we must admit this challenge is a serious blow to us as well. Here we have hooked up with Jesus, but even without realizing it we too are into the more successful side of Christianity - expecting Jesus to help us feel good about ourselves, deal with our problems, heal us when we're sick, and pretty much support our comfortable middle-class American lifestyle. That may be the Christianity we want, but that is not the Christianity Jesus gives us.

It is important to realize that Jesus does give us a choice. He acknowledges that it is up to us: "If any want to become my followers..." he says. We must decide to make the commitment. We have to be internally motivated to do this. So we have to ask ourselves if we are really interested in a Christianity that requires us to forget ourselves? Are we really interested in a Christianity that requires us to be willing to deny ourselves for the sake of following Jesus?

It is interesting that Luke here adds a word that is not in the other gospels. Matthew and Mark say, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Luke says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up the cross daily and follow me." That gives the statement a different feel, and I am not sure whether it makes it more palatable, or less.

Taking up the cross daily must mean that my commitment to Jesus needs to be lived out in the everyday ebb and flow of life. I hope you'll not misunderstand me when I say that I think participation in church is sometimes way over-rated. We, and I include myself in that "we," sometimes act as if service on church committees and in church events and in church groups is what our Christianity is all about. But, as excruciating as it can sometimes be to serve on church boards, that is not what taking up your cross daily is all about.

But taking up our cross daily and following Jesus is about what we do, well, daily. It's about the way we spend money, and remain true to our word, about the way we treat other people, and resist the cynicism of our culture. It's about having a heart for people on the margins, and having a mind to address the real systemic issues that create margins to begin with. It's about putting the real needs of others before our own mere comfort. It's about talking through the day with your kids, so they can see life through the lens of faith rather than through the lens of TikTok. In the end, taking up our cross daily is about our identity, the core sense of who we are that shapes the way we see the world, and guides our every action. If our core identity comes from being a disciple of Jesus, then it doesn't matter how

“churchy” we are.

I should add, however, two important comments. First, I believe that being a disciple of Jesus, having your identity shaped by him, can never be done on an individual basis. To be his disciple is to be part of his people – our faith is irreducibly communal. And secondly, I simply don’t believe, especially in the United States today, that we can maintain a Christian identity for long if we don’t regularly, even pretty much weekly, participate in corporate worship. This, my friends, what we do here on Sunday, is indispensable. We get our identity through the church, but we must live it, daily, our there in the ebb and flow of everyday life.

And, often, it is not easy. Remember that the thing we are doing daily, is taking up our cross and following Jesus. Again, the fundamental question is whether we are really interested in a Christianity that requires us to forget ourselves? Are we really interested in a Christianity that requires us to be willing to deny ourselves for the sake of following Jesus?

I don't know how many of us can truthfully answer that question by saying "Yes, I am interested in a Christianity which requires me to forget myself and live for God and others."

But I can tell you when we really hear the message of today's passage from Luke, then every single one of us would be willing to forget ourselves and live a truly exciting, challenging, grace-filled, generous version of Christianity. We would know that the one on the cross, the one of love, radiates still.

Today's passage, the Transfiguration, is a preview of Easter. As I have said, the passage that comes just before this confronts us with the central, difficult question of Christian discipleship, and as we struggle with our own willingness to forget ourselves and live as Christ would have us live daily, we are given a glimpse of what discipleship leads to – how, in the end, it all turns out. In the end is Easter. Without Easter, honestly, it would be nonsense to follow Jesus. If suffering and death were all that came at the end of a life of taking up our cross daily and following Jesus, then hey, forget it, I'm the first one out the door. But suffering and death are not the end. They do not have the last word. God's love is the last word - the most powerful force in all the universe, for the one on the cross, the one of love, radiates still.

And again, this passage is a preview of Easter. Jesus takes on divine form. He himself surpasses the pillars of Judaism - Moses, who gave the law - and Elijah, the stand in for all the prophets. This man is God's own dear Son. The very essence of the creator of the universe lives in him and nothing, not even death can defeat him, for the one on the cross, the one of love, radiates still.

I wonder if we often accept the easier version Christianity because we are not really sure about the gospel. We're not really sure that if we forget ourselves, lose ourselves, give up our selves for the sake of following Jesus, then we will find true life. But it's the gospels' truth. Today's passage assures us that when we take on the challenging demands of our faith, then no matter how hard it gets, we can see that the one on the cross, the one of love, radiates still.

I also fear that one of the reasons progressive Christianity in America is struggling is that we have managed to make Christianity boring. We have domesticated the Christian life, a life in which we forget ourselves is a life filled with challenging service, vibrant resistance, joyful generosity. As I have talked about, it's the big stuff and the small stuff. The global stuff and the daily stuff. It's the life that we shy away from because we are just not sure we won't get burned if we commit ourselves utterly, completely.

But the Transfiguration, this revelation of Jesus's splendor, at the darkest most difficult time, as he has announced his execution, and as we strive to faithfully face these days, this assures us that the one on the cross, the one of love, radiates still.

