

"Talk-a-Lot, Talk-a-Little-More"¹
February 23, 2020 (Transfiguration Sunday)
St. Paul's UCC Church
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Mark 8:27-9:7

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

¹ From Meredith Willson's song "Pick-a-Little, Talk-a-Little," *The Music Man* (1957).

Poor Peter. The guy just can't catch a break.

Things start out okay for him; they actually start out pretty good. Jesus is hanging out with his disciples – they're on the road to Caesarea Philippi – and Jesus, maybe a little bored, maybe wanting to strike up a conversation, suddenly asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" *What's the word on the street about me?* Jesus wants to know. His friends are quick to reply: "Oh, you know, some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." But this isn't really what Jesus is after. "But who do *you* say that I am?" And Peter does well here. This is where he gets it. He's paid attention. He knows what to say: "You are the Messiah." But then, Jesus puts his finger to his mouth: "Shhh! Don't talk about it!" Strange.

As if that isn't strange enough, Jesus then starts doing something even stranger: he starts talking about suffering, *his* suffering. He starts talking about how he's going to be rejected by his own people – by the elders, and the priests, and the scribes. He starts talking about how he's going to have to die. Now, he says all this very loudly, holding nothing back; and all of this makes Peter terribly uncomfortable. Peter doesn't like hearing about all this rejection and suffering and death stuff. This is not the way it's supposed to go! The Messiah is supposed to be a hero; he's supposed to kick tail and take names; the Messiah is supposed to make Israel great again. So Peter takes Jesus aside, and begins to rebuke him: "What are you saying, man? This is nonsense. The Messiah doesn't have to suffer. The Messiah doesn't have to die!"

Well, Jesus has no time for this. "Get behind me, Satan!" he barks back to Peter. "For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." Strange.

Fast forward to about a week later. Jesus seems to have gotten over Peter's misstep. (He's a pretty forgiving kind of guy, that Jesus). Jesus takes Peter, plus two of his other disciples, James and John, up to a high mountain. And there...something happens. Something pretty extraordinary. Something those disciples weren't expecting at all.

Mark writes: "And [Jesus] was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus." Wow. In just one instant, Jesus has gone from ordinary to dazzling. He's gone from a mere carpenter's son to one who belongs in the company of Israel's most revered prophets.

"Song of the Transfiguration" (*David Haas*)

Transform us as you, transfigured, stood apart on Tabor's height.
Lead us up our sacred mountains; search us with revealing light.
Lift us from where we have fallen, full of questions, filled with fright.

Transform us as you transfigured, once spoke with those holy ones.
We, surrounded by the witness of those saints whose work is done,
Live in this world as your Body, chosen daughters, chosen sons.

Transform us as you transfigured, would not stay within a shrine.
Keep us from our great temptation - time and truth we quickly bind.
Lead us down those daily pathways, where our love is not confined.

The church has taken to calling what happens on that mountain with Jesus and his three friends the Transfiguration – that moment of revelation when the curtain is thrown back, when doubt dries up and blows away, when Jesus can be seen for who he truly is: God in the flesh, radiating. Most likely, it's the greatest religious experience of the disciples' lives.

And then... Peter blows it. Again.

"Teacher, how good it is that we are here! We will make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Mark helpfully adds an editorial gloss: "[Peter] was so frightened that he did not know what to say." Faced with this moment of revelation and glory, once again, Peter blathers. He prattles. He sputters. Peter spouts nonsense. No one is speaking to Peter; but Peter is just chattering away.

You might say that Peter likes to talk.

One of my minister colleagues was teaching a Bible Study a few years ago. The group consisted of about fifteen adults, and in the middle of one of their sessions, my friend asked them: "Who listens to you? Who *really* listens to you?" The room was silent. Heavy seconds ticked by. Then sometime said, very quietly, "No one. No one listens to me on a regular basis." Everyone else in the room began to nod, slowly, and then more vigorously; and then people started talking. They talked about how they longed to be listened to. They talked about how sad they felt that they could not name one person who listened to them on a regular basis. They also talked about how they regretted that they themselves were not better listeners, and how they wished they could improve.

I get it. Sometimes I find myself talking too much, and I think this is because I feel that I have some great wisdom to impart, that if the person in front of me would only heed my wonderful advice, then they would feel so much better. They would *do* so much better. I'm not proud to admit it, but I also talk when I want to defend myself, to prove to you or to anyone else that what I'm doing is good or worthy.

Richard Foster, a spiritual teacher and writer, says this about the danger of talking too much: "A frantic stream of words flows from us in an attempt to straighten others out. We want so desperately for them to agree with us, to see things our way."² Oh, how I identify with that.

...But what if there's another way? I think Foster is saying that there's another way. What if, when faced with an uncomfortable situation, or with something I just don't understand, or with something I have an urge to defend... what if I said nothing? What if I were quiet? What if I listened instead? What if I allowed the discomfort, or the

²<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1326188-silence-frees-us-from-the-need-to-control-others-one>

unknown, or the need to defend, to just *sit there* for a while, to linger there for a while? What could I learn – from the other person, from myself, from God?

This is why I identify so strongly with Peter. Every time he comes up, I'm reminded that I have a real kinship with him – he's my peep! Faced with an uncomfortable situation – Jesus talking about how he has to suffer and die – Peter speaks too soon. Six days later, on a mountain, in the middle of unspoken mystery, Peter speaks too soon. He speaks when he should be listening.

And isn't that exactly what God says in this story? Mark writes, "Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; *listen to him!*"

This Wednesday begins the season of Lent. I'm usually not big on giving up things for Lent, but this year, I might actually have a good idea as to what to give up: talking so much. What if I did that? What if we did that? Whom could we listen to this Lenten season? What if we were to identify a person in our life whom we haven't listened to as much as we should, and commit to listening to them? What if we stopped trying to be right, to defend our wonderful, well-thought-out positions? What if we stopped trying to justify ourselves? What if, instead of talking, we were quiet?

Of course, we can't become totally quiet – we still have jobs to go to and family to take care of – but what if, this Lent, we talked just a little less? Texted or posted or emailed a little less? What if we shut our mouths, and opened our hearts? Just for Lent. What might we hear God saying?

Thanks be to God.