
Embrace Change
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
February 19, 2023
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mathew 17:1-21

[image: earth around sun]

Time really flies. I cannot believe we have just heard the story of the transfiguration of Jesus - again. I guess another year has passed us by. On the plus side, that means we get pancakes on Tuesday!

When the church board selected this date for our Annual General Meeting, I'm not sure that they were aware that this is also Transfiguration Sunday. Their concerns when selecting the date were far more pragmatic of course. But I think it is absolutely ideal that our AGM will immediately follow our worship service celebrating Transfiguration Sunday. After lunch I mean. But as I am speaking these words right now, I realize that perhaps you and I might be thinking of different versions of the transfiguration story.

What other versions of the transfiguration story are there? That is not a trick question. I'm not trying to test your biblical knowledge. There are 4 versions of the transfiguration of Jesus story in the Bible. The story is found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and there is a reference to the event in the Second Epistle of Peter. So there are 4 written versions of the story. But basically those all match each other. They are the same story. So what other transfiguration story is Rev Paul talking about? What other transfiguration story do you know? That is also not a trick question.

[image: butterfly emerging]

I want to lead into that by telling the story of the transfiguration in my own words. And since you know me, you know that when I read the Bible I choose to use a lens that leads to healing, hope, and new life, because that is how I understand the term "Good News". And the word "Gospel" means "good news".

So here goes. Jesus dealt with a lot of people. But he had a small group of friends

we call “the disciples”. And within that small group Jesus had a few really close friends - his besties. One day, Jesus had finished teaching to a large group and wanted to spend some time away from the crowds. Jesus often did this. Sometimes, Jesus went into quiet space alone, sometimes he went with the disciples, and sometimes he went with just his besties. On this occasion, Jesus went away with his besties up a hillside. Jesus wanted to find some peace. To meditate and reflect on life. This was common. Jesus lived an authentic life, and making time for reflection and inner peace was important to him.

When Jesus and his besties went up the hillside, Jesus did indeed find inner peace. He found himself. He had that face that I often see on people who are part of our drum circle. Jesus felt connected. He felt loved. He was at peace. He even began to glow. If you have never seen a person glow, come to our drum circle. Anyway, Jesus’s besties noticed that glow. And the besties expressed that glow in the language of their own culture, so they used a reference to the mythical story of Moses on the mountain. But that was only in their imagination. The glow itself - however - was real.

Jesus’s besties also felt this glow. They felt it’s presence. They felt connected too, but in a different way than Jesus felt connected. We all respond differently to the glow. The bestie’s response to this glow was to try to immortalize the experience. To preserve it. To bottle it. To lay it down on tape because solid state drives had not yet been invented.

And the besties even suggested that to Jesus. They suggested to Jesus that Jesus should himself want to live in that place and live in that glow. On that hillside. Away from all the people. The besties preferred the glow on the hillside to the messiness of dealing with real people.

Jesus did not even respond verbally to this recommendation. Jesus did not verbally disagree with his besties. Jesus did not belittle his besties for having the idea. Instead, Jesus’s response was simply to head back down from the hillside to where the rest of disciples were patiently waiting. And since the disciples had remained together, there was a crowd of people already there, waiting for Jesus.

And the very first thing that Jesus did when he returned was to help a person find healing. The disciples had tried to help the person themselves, but they had not

succeeded. And Jesus loved his disciples so much that he spoke truth to them. The truth was that they lacked the faith that they could make a difference in another person's life. [image: Luke: "I can't believe it". Yoda: "That is why you failed"]

I have told that story many times to many different people in many different contexts. But I think it is particularly poignant today since we will be having our AGM after this service.

To me the story of the transfiguration parallels the story of Sydenham-Heritage United Church. And more generally the story of the United Church of Canada. And more generally the story of mainline churches in Canada.

The parallel for me is found in the tension within the story. The disciples want to immortalize a perfect moment from their past. Jesus only cares about healing, and relationships.

To me, this matches the tension found in our churches today. That tension can be unveiled in different ways. One way is by simply asking, "why are we - as a church - here at all?" For example:

- Are we just immortalizing something from our past? Perhaps a time when we as a church had real social clout?
- Are we just immortalizing something from our past? Perhaps a time when we worshipped together with our children?
- Are we here just out of habit?
- Are we here because this is the only place where we can exert some control in our lives.
- Are we here because we can pretend for 1 hour every week that we still live in the past?

Or:

- Are we here because we have the faith that we can make a difference in another person's life.
- Are we here because we believe we can help other people find healing?
- Are we here because we believe we can find our own healing here?

Another way to unveil this tension is to ask who it is that we are becoming? Think back 1 year and compare. Who have we become in the past year? There is a great song by the band Styx called “Man in the wilderness” that asks,

[image: another year has passed me by]

“Another year has passed me by. Still, I look at myself and cry - “What kind of man have I become?”

We need to ask ourselves, what kind of church have we become? And “what kind of church do we want to be?”

Another way to unveil this tension is to see the church as a ship. As William Shedd famously said,

[image: a ship in harbour is safe]

“A ship in harbour is safe, but that is not what ships are build for.” It’s a good analogy for the church today. Again, not just Sydenham-Heritage United Church, but most mainline churches in Canada. You can keep a ship in harbour and keep it maintained. The hull will be clean. The decks will be spotless. The sails will be perfect. It will be the perfect ship. Except for the little detail that a ship that stays in a harbour does not live into it’s identity of being a ship.

Or you can take the ship out to sea. While you are at sea any repairs needed are either difficult or impossible. The hull will become contaminated. The decks will become greasy. The sails will rip in strong winds. But the ship at sea is living out it’s identity of being a ship.

Do we want to be a church where we are “perfect” because we never venture out and try new things? Or do we want to engage in our own community - and have honest relationships with each other - even if that exposes us to the messiness of our own lives?

We need to ask ourselves, what kind of church have we become? And “what kind of church do we want to be?”

When I interviewed here back in 2019, in the conversation it emerged that at one time, our slogan was “Embracing Change”. But I also recall that the conversation included a lot of laughter. Someone mentioned that when we adopted the slogan “Embracing Change” it did lead us to change. We immediately got rid of the slogan. That

is how I heard the conversation. And my experience of you has been that change does not seem to be particularly welcome here. But in any case, I used the phrase as a springboard into this reflection.

[image: butterfly emerging]

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus in many ways parallels the story of this congregation. With the very real difference that we do not know how the story of this congregation is going to end. We get to decide that for ourselves. And our AGM is part of our ongoing story. And I hope that all of us stay for that meeting.

I just want to leave you with a closing thought. And I need to change the title of this reflection too.

Earlier, when I retold the story of the transfiguration in my own words, right near the end of the story, we get the bit where the disciples tried - and failed - to heal the person. And then Jesus told them why they failed to heal the person. In my version I said, "Jesus loved his disciples so much that he spoke truth to them". The truth of why they failed to heal the person. It takes love to speak truth. Because truth is not always easy to hear or to speak.

I want you to know that I love you as a congregation so much that I am willing to speak truth to you. And the truth is that I should not have proposed the title "Embrace Change". Because that suggests that I have resolved the tension of who this church wants to be and become. And that's not my job. I do not get an opinion there. Never let a minister tell you who you are. Instead, let your minister hold up a mirror for you so that you can see yourself more clearly. Let your minister help you understand what options you have. And let them speak truth to you.

Given everything I know about you and my love for you as a congregation the title of this reflection needs to be "Embrace change, ... or not". It is up to you. It's your choice. We can leave the ship parked in the harbour, or we can go meet the waves head on at sea and be a ship. It's up to you. That is the tension in the transfiguration story. And that is the tension I see within this congregation. I hope that we all reflect on how we live out that tension during our Annual Meeting.

I opened by saying that there are different versions of the transfiguration story.

The most important version of the transfiguration story is the story of this congregation.

We need to ask ourselves, what kind of church have we become? And “what kind of church do we want to be?”

Amen.