

“Revealed in Full”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 16:24-17:8
March 3, 2019
Transfiguration Sunday

I want to take a quick poll of the congregation:

When presented with the question, “Do you want the good news or the bad news first?” how many of you opt for the bad news?

I’m definitely a bad-news-first person. I think it stems from the way I attacked my dinner plate as a kid. If there was something I didn’t like but knew my parents were going to make me eat, I would pinch my nose and gulp it down and get it out of the way so I could enjoy the rest of the meal.

The Gospel narrative always turns on Transfiguration Sunday. Before the mountain, we hear stories of Jesus teaching and healing and making quite the name for himself. And after the heady scene that Peter, James, and John witness, after they come down from the mountain, we turn toward Jerusalem. Through the season of Lent everything we encounter in Matthew’s account — every step, every parable, every conversation — will move us closer to the final week and the Last Supper and the garden and the cross and the tomb.

In this lesson, it would seem to work better for that turn if Jesus did the sparkly mountain deal and *then* started talking about bearing the cross. Instead we get the cross, then the Transfiguration, then back down the mountain and on to Jerusalem. In fact, just before the piece about taking up the cross, Jesus had told his disciples about going to Jerusalem and that he would die, and Peter couldn’t handle it and Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Jesus gives the bad news first: “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 will find it.”

It can be hard for our modern ears to twitch in the same way Jesus’s disciples, or even the hearers of this Gospel in the first centuries after his death, would have. The cross wasn’t a pendant on a gold chain or a sign to make in blessing. It had only one meaning: a humiliating, violent, gory, political death. Those who took up crosses didn’t do so voluntarily — it was the cruel punishment of the empire, used to make an example of those who colored outside the lines in a way that threatened Rome. To bear the cross meant being marched through the city to your grave. I imagine there were lumps in the throats of disciples, and those who came later and heard these words.

They’re just not as scary to us two thousand years later, and still we are faced with the temptation to soft-pedal this particular appearance of something potentially unpalatable on our plates. There’s a part of me that wants, even now, to barricade the doors and say, “Hey hey hey, it’s really not so bad following Jesus! Have a doughnut!”

But it *is* hard to follow Jesus. He *does* ask a lot of us. It likely won't surprise you to hear that I believe this is actually Good News and not bad news. But it is also the kind of news that I think we ought to be talking about more often.

Jesus is talking about sacrifice and service and giving of yourself.

I want to be abundantly clear that the sacrifice and suffering that comes with following Christ is not a burden that any other human can assign you. Nobody but God can tell you what your cross to bear might look like. I need to say that whenever this text pops up because Church history and Church present are littered with people in power telling people with less power that abuse or violence or inequality are crosses to be borne for Jesus. If someone tells you or someone you love that they need to endure that kind of suffering, the proper response is "Get behind me, Satan!" and then finding safety away from such an abusive theology.

Jesus is talking about finding yourself by losing the inherent human focus on the self. He is talking about being part of something bigger than our fears and anxieties and greed and self-righteousness and our steadfast certainty that we are the center of the universe. He is talking about getting over ourselves and seeing a bigger picture in which it is our responsibility to put our wealth and our gifts and our comfort and our bodies on the line in service of the boundary-breaking truth that God's love is bigger than anything we can create or imagine. This stuff may be scarier to our modern ears than I thought. And yet, we need to share this news, because in the Great Out There, there is a desperate hunger for meaning.

We who are in the Church and want it to grow can get sidetracked into being *nice* instead of *faithful*. It is tempting to try to make this weird walk of faith seem less demanding. But what I have seen *out there* is that folks — particularly young folks, especially Millennials — aren't looking for something easy. They're looking for something meaningful. They have seen the Church in the 20th Century and into the 21st take the easy path so many times: in failing to protect children, in compromising on the beloved-ness of the vulnerable in the name of unity, in ensuring its institutions' viability at the expense of speaking any prophetic word into a groaning world aching for transfiguration.

Who wants to be part of something that isn't willing to stand up, publicly, and lay some claim to the truth? The world yearns for something bigger, something worthy of the cross.

On Friday evening I received a notification that someone had sent a private message to the EPC Facebook page. I'll admit a bit of trepidation as I pulled up the message on my phone. It read: "I love the banner in front of your church! I had to stop and take a picture of it to share with some fellow Christians that have forgotten some of Jesus' words." I smiled and wrote a friendly message back. Then I started to worry about the resistance this woman might find.

If you haven't seen it, our current banner reads "Celebrating Christ's Radical Inclusion." That could be a fairly passive tagline. *Look at that Jesus, being all inclusive. Huzzah!* Instead, we are called to live into it actively, and that means being willing to listen to one another. It means that we might find ourselves a bit uncomfortable at times, because God doesn't ask your approval before sending someone your way. It means that when a new person comes into our midst, we can't declare, "You're so lucky to have found us," but we must shout, "Hey, it's you! We're so glad you're here!"

Celebrating Christ's radical inclusion means being willing to put something on the line in the name of relationship. It means putting ourselves on the line in the name of welcome. It means learning. It means that we risk offending those who would draw God's circle of love smaller. It means we risk pushback from family and friends who read scripture a different way. Are we willing to answer such a call?

There's this great line in our denominational rule book. While describing what the Church is at its core, our *Book of Order* reads: "The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life." (F- 1.0301) I've always loved that the call to do the hard thing, to put fidelity to God above buildings and budgets and anything else material, is right there in the rules.

Following Christ with such conviction is hard. But it is life-giving. And it is what we are called to do. The news that comes before the trip up the mountain asks much. And it is honest. Christianity is not an escapist religion, a bowl of warm platitudes and cotton candy dreams. It is a faith of dirt and wood and nails.

And light. Up on the mountain, even more is revealed to these disciples. In the sensory overload they encounter the holy. Their suspicions about Jesus being the One, the Messiah, are confirmed. They experience glory of glories, dazzling light, the very voice of God telling them that Jesus is beloved and ordering them to heed his words. This is news they want to capture before it slips through their fingers. They want to stay here. But it is not to be.

There is work to be done. They head down the mountain and Jesus gets back to healing. And he gets moving toward Jerusalem.

We make our move on Wednesday night here, as the season of Lent begins. We'll put sooty ash on our foreheads and talk about repentance and mortality and dust. The glory of the mountaintop will still be in the rearview mirror as we take the first steps on a forty-day journey that will bring us to an upper room, and a garden, and a palace, and the streets of Jerusalem, and a hillside, and a tomb.

We are encouraged to give something up or take something on for Lent. Some of us will fast from sweets or a bad habit. Some will try to focus on prayer through devotional reading or spiritual practices. We do these things to feel a bit of sacrifice and to be reminded of suffering and to take time to look inward in a search for the holy. We seek to transfigure our perception — to see things in some way closer to how God sees them — to look at our lives and our purpose and the earth and the light that falls upon it in a new way.

May this journey be meaningful for you. May it remind you that you are part of something bigger and more complex and more powerful than you can ever grasp. May you find yourself overwhelmed with grace and undeterred in service and find your life as you willingly lose it as God's truth is revealed more and more to you. Amen.