

**“ON BEING A SOMEONE TO ANOTHER”
LAST EPIPHANY – YEAR A – FEBRUARY 6, 2005
REV. DR. PATRICK R. CLOSE**

Today we hear the story of the Transfiguration on the Last Sunday of Epiphany. It is the ultimate revelation made to us describing just who Jesus is for us. Peter, James and John go up on the mountain and see Jesus’ appearance changed. Something important has happened here. It points to a powerful reality.

The word “transfiguration” is defined as “a striking change of appearance” and “a change that glorifies. Both definitions speak about change. What we come to understand is that Jesus’ transfiguration brings us closer to the likeness of God. We would do well to ask ourselves” How is God calling us to be transfigured? What in our lives needs to be changed to be closer to God? The answer lies for us in Jesus.

Being a Christian begins with our baptism. Today we welcome Madeline and Jacob into our faith community. Baptism speaks about our being set apart. It invites us to prepare to go up on the mountain and experience the power and presence of Jesus. To be a Christian, means to open ourselves to God’s work in us. We will have to teach Madeline and Jacob this and remind ourselves that we are on the way to be transfigured. We are being brought into a deeper and closer presence of God in Jesus!

Many of you have heard me talk about my belief concerning “coincidence.” I don’t think things “just happen.” I call them “God incidents” ... the weaving of events and life to bring us to a place God wants and will use. Two weeks ago I received an e-mail from one of you. It was a moving letter from a mother who had lost her son to suicide. I now look back and see I was being set up.

Last week, just before the annual meeting, the local funeral director popped in. She asked me if I could come and do a short service for a family. A woman had committed suicide and they wanted a clergy person to come and pray with them. I agreed to get there as soon as I could. When I approached the funeral home, the owner come out and spoke with me. He explained that the woman who died was 54, and left a husband and 16 year-old son. I had this strange connection flash through my mind. My wife is her age, and my son is his.

He went on to say that she slit her wrists and throat. I don’t mean to add this to be gruesome. I just want to stress the tragedy that had happened. I have dealt with suicide before and it always feels uncomfortable (it is the 11th leading cause of death, greater than that of homicides). I approached the family with a deep sense of despair and sadness.

What do you say to a family in this case? I know that in suicide there are feelings of despair, hopelessness, anger, guilt, shame and bewilderment. What is it in a person’s life when the pain becomes so great that they see no other way out other than death? I have heard that depression is anger turned inwards. I have heard at the root of anger is hurt. What happens to someone that they have no hope, no purpose to live? What changes occurred in this woman, Jean’s, life that led her to a point of no return? What do you say

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or do with a family who remain? I had a pervasive feeling of powerlessness. I made a response, but it felt inadequate. I said that I believe in a loving, forgiving God. Ours is a God whose love reaches out to us even beyond death. I asked them to let go and give her to God. Then I was just present ... I was just there.

Think about all those people in our lives and out in the world who are like this. They have been changed like this woman in a negative way by the world. They are suffering, hurting, despairing and hopeless. We have to face up to the darkness in the world. Madeline and Jacob will have to know that there are these things in our world. Is there an answer other than death? For me, somehow, it has to do with Jesus, God, love, hope ... and us. The change these people experience in the world is not transfiguration. It is not life giving. Somehow, someone has to bring them good news.

The e-mail I received was about a woman named Chris. It was written to family, friends and co-workers after the suicide of her son Jimmy. Through the pain, sadness and grief she spoke of thanks and the gift of understanding. I saw in this letter a moment of transfiguration.

Chris says many things to us. She said; please don't ask why ... there is no answer. Please don't be angry ... it only intensifies the separation. Please don't say we deserved this (like I have heard other Christians say) ... no one deserves poverty, cancer or a brain injury. Please don't say it isn't fair ... life isn't fair. Please don't feel sorry ... I need patience, not pity. Pray for me for the day when the “if only's” are replaced by the “remember when's.”

Chris continued in her letter by talking about a journey. She said that there is a way to help during these difficult journeys through life. She went on to talk about visiting her mother in a Florida hospital after Jimmy had died. Chris went to the hospital chapel to pray. There she found a book of prayer requests. She wrote down Jimmy's and her mother's name. Chris flipped through the pages ... there were four months worth of prayer requests dating back four months to the Florida hurricanes in August.

The examples are many. One request asked for a loved one to be taken to heaven; another for freedom from pain ... cancer ... sickness. Another request was for someone in Iraq. One request was for help during a divorce. Others asked for patience or hope. Some prayer requests spoke of thanksgiving or love. Other requests asked for patience ... money ... or understanding. One gave thanks for a second chance.

One prayer request blew Chris away. The woman wrote thanking God in advance, so that she wouldn't be considered selfish and to please heal everyone in the book ... and the ones who haven't made it in the book yet.

What do we do with feelings of prayer and desolation? Chris' letter speaks about a way. She told her readers that we are all in a boat ... maybe not the same boat ... and on a

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journey. Sometimes we are up a creek without a paddle. All she asked was for people to offer a paddle from time to time to keep her on course. She asked for help.

Chris added that she was deeply struck by the “need a miracle prayers.” One woman wrote down six different requests in the book. She ended with this prayer request: “I have no one to help me. Please send someone to help me before I collapse.” This woman had no one ... this is despair and a sense of no hope. Chris prayed for someone to help her. She didn’t know if anyone helped her ... but she knew I CAN BE SOMEONE TO ANOTHER IN NEED.

This is a moment of transfiguration. Jesus was there for the disciples, for others and is here for us. We are called to be like him. We are called to be Christ-like by being a someone to another in need. Chris told her family and friends: “What you can do for me is be a someone ... to provide me a paddle once in a while.” It’s these moments that can transfigure others and us.

Jesus was “someone” to his disciples. He is someone to Madeline and Jacob. He is someone to us. Jesus’ presence shows us how much God loves and cares for us. He is the constant reminder that God is present in our life, especially during times of pain and suffering. Jesus moves us towards our transfiguration. The world will try to change us ... but we have a choice of how that change will affect us.

Jesus Christ can transfigure us. We can be a “someone” a “paddle.” There’s a world of darkness that creates despairing, hurting, hopeless people. We can make a difference. We can be Christians. We can be disciples. We can be like Jesus. We can make a difference. Be a someone ... hand a paddle of hope to another person. Be a presence. Be part of the transforming grace of God. Let’s help answer the prayer of that woman in a Florida hospital ... Please send someone before I collapse ...

We will be that someone?