

# Oppression and Transformation

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Transfiguration Sunday

The Third Sunday in Black History Month

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Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

I have heard it said that it isn't necessary to be a mystic to be a Christian – but it helps. Those of you who have followed this series of sermons inspired by Howard Thurman's book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, have heard me describe Thurman as a mystic, among other identities, and mysticism was a key ingredient in Thurman's spiritual, piety, teaching, writing, preaching, and social justice activism.

Transfiguration Sunday is a perfect moment to speak of mysticism because what happens to Jesus on the mountain sounds plenty mysterious: "And he was transfigured before them." The verb is *metamorphoo*, the root of our English word "metamorphosis." The verb occurs four times in the New Testament, and it refers to a change in outward appearance "***in keeping with an inner reality.***" In other words, the outward appearance has to keep up with the inner transformation. What Peter, James, and John witnessed in Jesus' appearance was, to borrow language from St. Augustine, "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." That's how Augustine defined a sacrament, and we in the Reformed Christian tradition have impoverished ourselves by limiting the sacraments to two – baptism and the Eucharist – and it is mysticism that helps us recover a fuller, richer, truer understanding of the sacramental nature of reality itself.

For Howard Thurman, mysticism was what he articulated in the Centering Words I've chosen for this morning's service:

***"There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will, all of your life, spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls."***

"The sound of the genuine" is a reality that is at the same time supremely personal and inescapably objective – mystical, in other words. It is a phrase that could function as a definition of God – God's call to each and every one of us to live in that image and likeness of the divine in which we are all created.

The objective reality is being human or the human being; that identity belongs to all of us *homo sapiens*, and it is an inescapable identity. We are created in God's image, and no matter how much we try to avoid it, the "hound of heaven" never gives up, as Francis Thompson described God's relentlessly pursuing grace of our souls. That hound "doggedly" seeks to drive the wandering individual back to their core identity as *imago Dei*, the image of God.

We prefer nowadays to speak of our fundamental identity as "child of God," but "child of God" and "image of God" mean the same thing. That's the objective reality—God's Image, God's Child, God's Beloved—the very words Jesus heard at the start of his ministry at his baptism, and now, today, at the beginning of the end of that ministry, at his transfiguration.

And as much as we Christians like to shellac Jesus with layer after layer of Christological dogma and doctrine, the Biblical witness to Jesus' identity is that he was simply "The Human One," the label he applied to himself more than any other. Even the Updated Edition of the NRSV, progressive as it is, still uses the sexist label "Son of Man" to translate "*ho huios tou anthropou*," which means nothing more – and nothing less – than "one in the category of human being."

That's how Jesus saw himself: God Incarnate and one in the category of human being. Jesus' divinity drove him not into the arms of God, but rather into the throes of human existence. It was his divinity—his transparent openness to God's presence within him—that made him quintessentially human. And to embrace both of those identities fully, equally, gracefully, and fearlessly was the transforming choice that Jesus made. That was the choice that made Jesus Jesus.

Thus, the orthodox Christological formulation of Jesus as simultaneously fully human AND fully divine. To be fully one is to be fully the other. Jesus got that, lived that, and called his followers to live it for themselves.

And how would they do that? As being fully Peter open fully to God, being fully Andrew open fully to God, fully Mary open fully to God, and fully Dick and fully Sharon and fully Scott and fully Sally, all being open fully to God.

When we are fully our God-given selves, as distinct from the manufactured selves that the world builds for us and that we build for ourselves and that most of us wear like suits of armor, when we live our God-given selves, we bring to life those personalities that make us distinctively us. We light up, in other words, just as Jesus did at his transfiguration.

As the great second-century bishop, teacher, and saint, Irenaeus is supposed to have put it, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."

And here's the irony in Irenaeus: to become fully alive is both the hardest and the easiest thing any of us will ever do our entire life. No other task—doing well in school or in sports, falling in love and finding a mate, finishing a graduate degree, raising children or battling an illness—none of that will be as difficult as turning our backs on all of those subtle, sublime, and delicious temptations to be other than who God created us and calls us, relentlessly, to be. That's the hard part of Christianity.

The easy part is that there is nothing for us to do except, as the bumper sticker says, let go and let God. You and I type-A overachievers that populate churches like this one tend to be mightily resistant to the idea of letting go and letting God. We didn't get where we are without a lot of sweat, some tears, and maybe even a little bloodshed.

A friend of mine was preaching on this topic at a prestigious girls' school in Manhattan some years ago, basing his sermon on Jesus' words, "Consider the lilies of the field." As folks were filing out of the chapel at the end of the service, the father of one of the girls gripped my friend's hand in a not altogether friendly handshake and said, "Preacher, that sermon was complete rubbish. My daughter didn't get into this school by considering the lilies, she isn't excelling at this school by considering the lilies, and she won't succeed at life by considering the lilies. Hard work, not contemplating the lilies or her belly button, has made her the successful young woman that she is. Have a good day."

And he was right! As the world defines success, hard work is the key. But as you heard me say last week in speaking of human versus divine wisdom, by the world's standard Jesus was a colossal failure: a promising young teacher and healer done to death in his prime by a state threatened by his words to consider the message the lilies convey to us about the nature of God and God's care for us.

Those words were threatening to Caesar because Caesar wants you to believe that it is Caesar—the state, the government—that takes care of you, and since Caesar takes care of you, you take care of Caesar by doing exactly what Caesar tells you to do.

And Jesus resisted that claim. Jesus stood in the tradition of Israel's prophets going all the way back to Moses and Elijah, which is why they appeared at his transfiguration, and refused to play Caesar's game and buy into Caesar's lies.

And he refused to play that game and swallow those lies because he knew that they were part of that broad path that leads to oppression and destruction. "I came that they may have life," he said, "and have it abundantly." Not oppression, not death, not submission to the will of the state.

And because Jesus refused to play Caesar's game, he didn't have to play by Caesar's rules, and Caesar never likes people who don't play according to Caesar's rules.

What made Jesus Jesus was his refusal to allow Caesar—the state, the government, the administration, call that posturing authority what you will—to occupy that space inside of him—that God-shaped hole—that nothing except God can fill. To be created in God's image, which all of us believers affirm, is to be created with that God-shaped hole at the center of us that nothing but God can fill. And that's why all of our social activism, all of our marching for justice, all of our pleas for the oppressed—they all have to start spiritually if they are to transform and not merely confront. As I said a couple of sermons ago, loving God above all else is spirituality; loving our neighbor as we love ourselves is religion. To all who heed the voice of the genuine within them, and no longer dance at the ends of strings being pulled by someone else, the former must precede the latter and they are inextricably and forever bound together.

It's easy, on Transfiguration Sunday, to get befuddled by the text and the fancy words and scratch our heads and say, "Huh?"

But mysticism is not a puzzle or a problem to be solved. It is a relationship to be entered, nurtured, and sustained with what Paul Tillich called The Ground of Being, what Howard Thurman called The Genuine within us. If you're serious about following Jesus, then do what Jesus did. Spend more time listening to God's voice and less time doom scrolling. Let go, as Jesus did, of those temptations presented to him by the devil that we're all familiar with and let God, rather than the world, show you what is really true, really honest, and really beautiful. Jesus played God's game according to God's rules. He called that living in "the realm of God," where there is no southern border, no laws that make some legal and some illegal, and no masks to hide behind--and when Jesus gave his allegiance and his life to God's realm, rather than to Caesar's, Caesar and Caesar's followers took offense, pushed back, and pushed back hard, just as they are doing now. This is an old story played out on many battlefields.

But the battlefield out there, friends, will always be the scene of the second victory. The site of the first victory has to be in here, as Howard Thurman saw. Thurman identified fear, hypocrisy, and hatred as the spiritual consequences of oppression.

These are not just reactions; they are **tools of domination**.

And if we are not to allow those tools to bully us, beguile us, or betray us, then we must first be transformed within.

That transformation will mean:

- Freedom from fear without denying that the danger is real.
- Love that refuses to swaddle itself in sentimentality or become hatred's mirror image.
- And a spiritual and personal integrity that resists the lie that survival requires self-betrayal.

Transfiguration Sunday proclaims that

- God's glory reshapes the inner life
- Recognizing one's own Belovedness **precedes** one's success in the outward struggle
- Freedom begins when fear loses its hold.

Let me close with a few more of Howard Thurman's words, these from his book, *Meditations of the Heart*:

***"There is in every person something that waits, listens for the sound of the genuine, and if it hears it, will never be the same."***

Transformation is not withdrawal, friends; it is the **release of divine life into the world**.

We end our service by singing hymn 314, "Christ Be Our Light," vv. 1, 2, 5.