

Message: Why Live Generously

Today is known as Transfiguration Sunday. Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us about a special event that happened near the end of Jesus’ life. It’s helpful to know what was going on in Jesus’ life to put it into context. By now, Jesus was a superstar. Thousands of people followed him around, waiting to hear him teach. In fact, they would stay all day and all night, leaving their homes to come. Mark tells us how Jesus miraculously fed 4,000 people who were hungry so he could continue to teach them (Mark 8:1-10).

A short time later, Jesus and his disciples are on the way to some northern villages. As they walked along Jesus asked, “*Who do the people say I am?*” The disciples said, “*Some say ‘John the Baptist.’ Others say ‘Elijah.’ Still others say ‘one of the prophets.’*” Jesus then asked, “*And you - what are you saying about me? Who am I?*” Peter gave the answer: “*You are the Christ, the Messiah.*”

Jesus began explaining what that meant to them saying, “*It is necessary that the Son of Man proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religious scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive*” (Mark 8:31). Peter and the disciples protested. After all, they’ve committed their lives to Jesus. They think he’s going to lead a popular revolt and free the people from Roman occupation.

Jesus sets them straight saying, “*If any of you are embarrassed over me and the way I’m leading you when you get around your fickle and unfocused friends, know that you’ll be an even greater embarrassment to the Son of Man when he arrives in all the splendor of God ..., with an army of the holy angels*” (Mark 8:38). Then he drove it home by saying, “*This isn’t pie in the sky. Some of you who are standing here are going to see it happen, see the kingdom of God arrive in full force.*”

Six days later, three of them *did* see it. Jesus invited Peter, James and John to follow him up a mountain. We read this passage earlier. When they get there, something incredible and wonderful happens.

Jesus changes. He transfigures right in front of them! Mark tells us Jesus’ *“appearance changed from the inside out, right before their very eyes”* (Mark 9:3). Not only that, *“His clothes shimmered, glistening white, whiter than any bleach could make them”* (v3). Two people *“became visible who were in deep conversation with Jesus”* (v4). All they could think of was their earlier conversation: the two must be Moses (the prophet) and Elijah!

This was no Hollywood special effect. It was a real, sudden, dramatic transformation. The power of the Holy Spirit inside Jesus revealed itself. The divine light was so bright and powerful it illuminated Jesus’ flesh and it transformed the robe Jesus wore. I love that small, practical, human detail. These men knew that no laundry could get clothes that white. They’d seen Jesus in his shorts waiting for laundry to dry!

How would you respond if your teacher and friend transformed right in front of you? I don’t know about you, but I’d be shocked and really uncomfortable. I wouldn’t know what to say or do. I’d probably be afraid. Have you ever been in a really awkward situation in front of someone who you looked up to? I know I have. It’s easy to say or do dumb things. That’s what Peter does.

God went over the top. Mark recorded what Peter told him later, *“a (bright) cloud enveloped them, and from deep in the cloud, a voice: ‘This is my Son, marked by my love. Listen to him.’ [A minute later, the cloud was gone and] the [three] were looking around, rubbing their eyes, seeing nothing but Jesus...”* (vv7-8).

God spoke. Jesus is more than human. Jesus is divine, God’s true Son.

There’s a subtext. If Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets of Israel, listen to Jesus, then all of Jesus’ disciples, then, now and in the future, should listen to Jesus and do what he says. The message is clear: we have to follow Jesus and live the way he taught us, embracing his humanity and his divinity. Just knowing who Jesus is and believing he’s special isn’t good enough.

I think Peter, James and John – Jesus’ small group leaders, needed a lesson. They each had their own reasons for following Jesus.

Whatever their motive, it wasn't aligned with God's plan. To be fair, the disciples were following Jesus around. They had made personal and career sacrifices. They were learning to care for people. They lived simply, spent a lot of time traveling and seldom were in one place very long. They were looked down on by the authorities – political, civil and religious. They were outsiders. They knew the “what” of following Jesus. But they didn't really, truly understand “why” following Jesus was important.

Jesus showed them (& us) why. And it changes the world.

All of us need to go beyond the content of Scripture, the what. We need to understand why, no matter whether you're a senior, adult, young adult, youth or a child. Faith isn't about a book or some sort of special knowledge. Faith is purely and simply about remaining focused on, and in relationship with, Jesus.

There's more to teaching a person than making sure they can pass a test or demonstrate a skill. You see, with unsuccessful students there's almost always a “believing problem.”¹ It's not that they're not smart enough. It's that they don't believe they can be successful. They don't believe you're on their side. They don't believe they have the power to live a fulfilling and good life. We can't solve this problem by adding more information to their lives. We teach well when we serve as compasses pointing people to the truths they need to live independent, productive lives. We teach well when we teach why.

What's your “why”?

Here's a video by Michael Jr. to help us answer the question:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZe5y2D60YU&feature=youtu.be>

Understanding why made a difference in the singer's life. It made a difference in Michael Jr.'s life. He's collected a lot of videos that show the power and relevance of understanding why.

What we do is important. God made every one of us and gave us gifts, abilities, personalities and feelings. Our experiences mold and shape us.

¹ <http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2017/02/give-meaning-content/>

Jesus called us to be part of an assembly, so we can learn from one another and do the impossible together.

The why gives meaning, purpose and direction to what we do.

It's what changes us from someone who comes to church when it's convenient and stays in touch if it appeals, to someone who looks for opportunities to worship and praise God, serving every chance they get, ready to share their experiences with everyone they meet. That's the shift from passive participation to actively seeking and passing God's blessing on to others. It's radical, passionate, intentional, risk-taking and extravagant.

It's the difference between a life of scarcity and a life of abundance.

There's a shift in our view and purpose in life. We make room for grace. That's living generously, even extravagantly.

There's a story about a man who found his eighty-year-old friend planting a very small, short tree. The man asked, “What kind of tree is that?” “Why, it's a peach tree,” said his friend. “I love to eat peaches.” The man said, “You're a crazy fool. You'll never live to see that tree bear fruit. What do you think you're doing?” The man replied, “I love peaches. I've been eating peaches all my years because someone planted peach trees. So I'm planting this peach tree for somebody else to enjoy the fruit of this tree in the future.”

That's a great lesson about living generously: generosity is helping others in real, practical ways. The tree didn't cost much, but the thought, intention and care needed to help that peach tree to grow and thrive until it reached it's full, fruit-bearing potential requires an investment of time, energy and money with hope. That's what Extravagant Generosity is all about. It's about living with grace.

The world says to us “earn all you can, and give out of your abundance.” In other words, share your leftovers with someone who's hungry – AFTER you've eaten! That's not what God tells us. Jesus teaches us to invite those who are hungry to join us at the table. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes “... *do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up ... the treasure of a good*

foundation for the future, so (you) may take hold of the life that really is life” (1 Timothy 6:18-19).

An abundant life is the life that gives itself away. God is calling us to be people who don’t hang on to our time, money and energy for all we’re worth out of fear but who give and give and give freely. This kind of generous living is expressed when we love other people because we’re grateful to God for the love we receive.

When we hang on to what we have out of fear, we’re living out of scarcity: Will I have enough? Well, I can tell you this: we all have enough. There’s not a person in this room who doesn’t have enough. Few of us are in desperate straits, wondering where our next meal is coming from. In fact, the opposite is true. We have so much, we’re picky consumers. We expect it our way, all the time and right how! The rampant consumerism of our society can be expressed this way: “We buy things we don’t even need with money we don’t even have to impress people we don’t even know.”²

Rather than living as consumers, trapped in a spiral of media-induced hype and out-of-control self-interest, let’s challenge each other during Lent and all of 2018. **What does it mean for our congregation to strive without ceasing to exceed expectations in our generosity? What are some big, life-changing, seriously scary ideas we could take on?** I look forward to hearing how God is working on your hearts next week.

Let us pray...

“Dear God, you call us give ourselves, our resources, and our time to others. Help us to overcome our fears and our uncertainties and live generous lives with joy and confidence. Today as we evaluate how we are doing in the practice of generosity, help us to be honest and yet optimistic and hopeful, remembering that all things are possible with Christ. It is in his name that we pray. Amen.”³

² *Schnase, Op cit., Teaching Guide, p. 13*

2 Kings 2:5-12 (CEB)

The group of prophets from Jericho approached Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master away from you today?”

He said, “Yes, I know. Don’t talk about it!”

Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here, because the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.”

But Elisha said, “As the LORD lives and as you live, I won’t leave you.” So both of them went on together. Fifty members from the group of prophets also went along, but they stood at a distance. Both Elijah and Elisha stood beside the Jordan River. Elijah then took his coat, rolled it up, and hit the water. Then the water was divided in two! Both of them crossed over on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “What do you want me to do for you before I’m taken away from you?”

Elisha said, “Let me have twice your spirit.” [inherit your spiritual faith]

Elijah said, “You’ve made a difficult request. If you can see me when I’m taken from you, then it will be yours. If you don’t see me, it won’t happen.”

They were walking along, talking, when suddenly a fiery chariot and fiery horses appeared and separated the two of them. Then Elijah went to heaven in a windstorm.

Elisha was watching, and he cried out, “Oh, my father, my father! Israel’s chariots and its riders!” When he could no longer see him, Elisha took hold of his clothes and ripped them in two.

Mark 9:2-9 (CEB)

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain where they were alone. He was transformed in front of them, and his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white. Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus. Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, “Rabbi, it’s good that we’re here. Let’s make three shrines—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He said this because he didn’t know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, “This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!” Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Human One had risen from the dead.

The Message Mark 9:2-10

Six days later, three of them *did* see it. Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. His clothes shimmered, glistening white, whiter than any bleach could make them. Elijah, along with Moses, came into view, in deep conversation with Jesus.

Peter interrupted, “Rabbi, this is a great moment! Let’s build three memorials - one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah.” He blurted this out without thinking, stunned as they all were by what they were seeing.

Just then a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and from deep in the cloud, a voice: “This is my Son, marked by my love. Listen to him.”

The next minute the disciples were looking around, rubbing their eyes, seeing nothing but Jesus, only Jesus.

Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy. “Don’t tell a soul what you saw. After the Son of Man rises from the dead, you’re free to talk.” They puzzled over that, wondering what on earth “rising from the dead” meant.