

Transfiguration Sunday
2 Corinthians 4:1-6
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“...we do not lose heart.”

This is the Sunday that the church calls Transfiguration - the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany. The gospel lesson for this Sunday is always one of the accounts of Jesus' journey up to the top of the mountain with several of his disciples. His disciples saw him transformed, transfigured, changed - his appearance dramatically altered. Some of those say that his clothes became dazzling white and that his face shone. Every few years I find myself moved to read the Epistle lesson for this Sunday, from Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, because this lesson reminds me that, unless I am also changed, the change that occurred to Jesus may make no difference to my life. And so I read *2 Corinthians 4:1-6*.

Few things are as hard to watch as someone who has lost heart. But I have seen it, and so have you. Two recessions ago. John was in his mid-forties... bright, witty, well-educated. A lovely family... children making their way into adulthood, and suddenly, a job that seemed secure was just gone. Resume after resume, phone call after phone call, the polite replies: *Thank you, but you seem to be overqualified for what we need at this time*. Weeks became months... still nothing. All of a sudden, we began to notice lines in his face and circles under his eyes as if he were not sleeping well. His smile seemed forced, the tone of his voice flatter - with less life, less energy. He had lost heart.

It can happen to any of us. I once knew a woman who held a responsible position, but she was passed over for promotion time and time again. Men, less experienced and less qualified, were promoted ahead of her. It soon became apparent that she had gone as far as she was going to go with that firm. She became discouraged. Her work began to suffer. She began to wonder if she would ever be able to use the full range of her skills and abilities. She began to lose heart.

Sometimes church people lose heart. I have known good Christian people who grew weary of church - weary of what they perceived as too much management and too little gospel, too much bureaucracy, too little community of faith. I have seen people disillusioned by the church's preoccupation with the symbols of its success. I have seen people drift away because church seemed to be exclusive and self-serving instead of a servant community, dedicated to the love of God and the love of neighbor. Church people can lose heart.

I have seen it happen to preachers. A good friend and a minister, had in his congregation what he called his *select committee on discontent*. They rarely missed an opportunity to criticize or object to anything he said or did. Oh, they never cut a gaping wound, never challenged him openly or directly, but a little nick here, a little puncture there, a look or an unkind word.... He said that he began to spend all of his energy wondering how they would come at him next. Now, my friend was not perfect - he made mistakes. We all do. But like dripping water will begin to erode

a stone, he began to wonder if his adversaries were right. He got defensive... began to think that maybe he was not suited for ministry after all... and he began to lose heart.

Sometimes a congregation loses heart. It happens. I think that there was a time when church was a part of the very air we breath. That may have been more true in some places than in others. But I think there was a time when church life was integral to the life of a community. Everyone went to church... or, at least, they said they did.. Nurseries were full. Youth programs were bursting at the seams. Two services. And then, something began to happen. Numbers began to decline. People began to drift away. It became harder and harder to find people who were willing to give time and energy to the church. *We're all so busy...* In some places that change was accelerated by transitions in the neighborhood - changes for which the congregation was ill prepared. Rural churches, once strong and vital, watched their children go off to the university or to the city to find a job, and they did not come home. Twice this congregation, Central Christian Church, has made the intentional decision to remain downtown, even when more and more people were living and shopping and going to school in the suburbs. It was, to my mind, the right decision (both times). But it was also a courageous decision - a decision that entailed no small amount of risk. I have seen congregations like Central, congregations that once focused on mission, begin to go through the motions of trying to survive. These are not easy days for some churches, not easy days to live as Christian people. Little wonder that some lose heart.

Of all the things that Paul said in the letters which he wrote to congregations that he had established or nurtured, I know of nothing more remarkable than this single little sentence: *Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry... we do not lose heart.* If anyone had reason to lose heart, it was Paul. And if any congregation was likely to cause its pastor to suffer heart loss, it was the one to which he wrote - First Christian Church of Corinth.

Things are not going well for Paul. In the very beginning of this letter he talks about the suffering and affliction he has experienced. *In Asia*, he says, *we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.* He tells them that he is not coming to Corinth. *I made up my mind not to make another painful visit*, he says. Another painful visit? Why would visiting Corinth be painful?

The first letter to the Corinthians (what we call the first letter) reveals a congregation struggling to learn what it means to be a Christian community. Like every Christian community, including ours, there were things yet to be learned. In Corinth, some members were quarreling and squabbling over their status in the congregation. Some were claiming superior spiritual knowledge. Some were suing one another in the civil courts, and some were engaging in sexual immorality and some were getting drunk at the Lord's Supper. Some were worshipping idols, some were claiming a superiority of their particular spiritual gift, some were questioning whether or not Jesus had really been raised from the dead.

In the second letter we learn more about the trouble within. Someone in that congregation is bitterly opposed to Paul and denies his apostolic authority. It is painful when students reject the one who taught them. And on top of all of this internal turmoil, not everyone who heard the gospel believed. Not everyone in Corinth embraced the faith. Paul felt compelled to explain: ... *even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers....* Were there those in the church who wondered out loud, *if what*

Paul has taught us is true, why isn't the church more successful?

It was to this church, this contentious and divided congregation, this church rife with opposition and pain and ugliness and pettiness and bitterness - it was to the Christians in Corinth that Paul writes: *We do not lose heart*. Most church people I know would have canceled their pledge, quit attending all those committees on which they served, started sleeping in on Sunday mornings. I can hear the conversation in the parking lot: *If that is the way people act in the church - I want no part of it*. Most pastors I know would have sent their ordination certificate back to the regional office... run the seminary diploma through the shredder and gone to work bagging groceries at Kroger. And Paul says, *We do not lose heart*. What was it? What was the source of strength that enabled him to keep on keeping on? What encouraged him to hold on to the faith? What kept resignation and despair from consuming him? Why did Paul not lose heart? If we can answer that question, maybe we will discover what brings strength and hope and power to the church.

In this letter, Paul has been talking about his own ministry and his own faith... about the source of its strength and vitality. What he describes is not his own strength of will, not his own internal self-assurance or confidence in his gifts and abilities. It is neither his disposition nor his character that will see him through. What enables Paul to carry on, is that he no longer measures success or failure or strength or weakness by normal standards. He has been changed... transformed... made, somehow, into a new and different person.

This part of the letter begins this way: *Thanks be to God, who in Christ leads us in the triumphal procession*. (For one who has been ignored and abused and maligned - a parade of victory. Think of the Phillies in Philadelphia, just a few months ago.) And then, in sentence after sentence after sentence, he talks of God. God - the source of confidence. God, revealed in Christ - the source of commendation. Christ - the one in whom God's truth is revealed, the one in whom God's purpose is made plain. Christ - the one in whom the veil that has separated God from humankind has been lifted. *And all of us*, Paul says, *with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another ... for this comes from the Lord* And when Paul says: *we are being transformed*, the word he uses is exactly the same word that the gospel writers use to describe what happened to Jesus on the top of that mountain.

Just like Jesus, the Christ, we're being changed - changed because we see the glory of God in Jesus Christ. Then, and only then, can Paul say: *Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart*.

These are not easy days. They are not easy days for our nation or our community. They are not easy days for the global network of the human family. They are not easy days for the church. Maybe the church will never see easy days again. Maybe we shouldn't. The only thing that I know is that it enables followers of Jesus to live confidently and fearlessly, not disheartened by struggles within or challenges without... it is the change, the transformation that takes place in mind and heart when we look at Jesus of Nazareth and see God at work in the world. God at work - not in strength, not in power, not in arrogant displays of might, but in serving... in self-giving... in acts of compassion and mercy and justice and kindness. When we see that, it changes us, because we realize that we no longer have to rely on our own wisdom or strength or skill - although we should not abandon any of those things. But what gives us heart is the sense that

we, like Jesus, are about something that is of holy importance... that we are a part of God's work in the world... God's work to heal and reconcile and stir the waters of justice and bring peace - God's peace to God's creation.

We are not about little things. We are about God's things. When that realization grabs hold of us, we will be changed. And when we are changed - transformed - we will not be able to lose heart.