

Jesus and the Anti-Racist Journey—Matthew 17: 1-7 (February 19, 2023-Transfiguration Sunday)

A commitment can transform you. When Andrea and I decided to have children some years back it changes how I view myself. I go from the comfort of being a son to the daunting realization of what it means to be a father, from being the one for whom much was sacrificed and given to being the one called to sacrifice and give for the sake of another. You surrender yourself to a path, a direction, a way of life and you begin to see yourself through that lens, a change happens, you're not the same person.

That's what's going through my mind as I listen to our faith story today—Jesus surrenders to the truth that his unwavering commitment to love will lead to a confrontation and ultimately death and this profoundly transforms him. I'm captured initially by that little phrase at the beginning, "Six days later.", well what happened six days before? What happens is that in chapter sixteen, for the first time Jesus announces to his friends that he will die at the hands of his own religious authorities.¹ That prompts another question, "what happens in those six days between that awful revelation and the events on the mountain?" Well, we don't know, Matthew leaves that up to our imaginations. I like that about scripture.

We might well ask, "What happens to any of us in that in-between time, that time between receiving news that shakes us to the core and the moment when we're ready to face life head on?" Perhaps it's a terrible diagnosis, being told by your spouse that they want a divorce or news of the death of a loved one. Our lives are in complete turmoil, aren't they? Our footing is gone, there is nothing solid in our lives anymore. Revelations such as these take a part of us away and cause us to ask, "Who am I now?" I imagine in those six days Jesus doesn't get much sleep, he's irritable, testy with his friends. I imagine he has some vulnerable conversations with his friends, perhaps the ones who accompany him up the mountain.

It's on that mountain that Jesus settles into his destiny and becomes ready to face life head on once again. He makes sense of his fate as one who is in a long line of Jewish leaders and prophets who took up God's call to be agents of liberation and truth tellers—Moses and Elijah. He remembers the blessing from his baptism, "This is my own, my beloved, on whom my favour rests..." An affirmation, yes, but also a call. A call to live fully into this core identity. Which, in a world of fear and grasping power means great risk in the name of love. Jesus is transfigured, transformed by the embracing of this commitment as reflected in the change in his appearance.

I ponder this story during this Black History Month and our commitment to be an anti-racist church. It's a commitment that changes us, that changes how we see ourselves, our place in the community and our community itself. I wasn't here last week, but I watched the video of the sharing on the question of what's become clearer to you about racism and anti-racism over the last two to three years and I heard the theme of how this commitment has transformed some of us.

Last week someone spoke about "the talk". The talk Black parents have with their kids about how to act black in the world, so you stay safe. As a white person you realize this is one of the many things you don't need to worry about in life. You begin to see yourself as a person of privilege compared to Black and other racialized people. A commitment to being anti-racist transforms how you see public safety. It's not just an issue of enforcement, but safety comes from fairness, equity and economic opportunity and security for all people. A commitment to anti-racism changes us in the sense that we become acutely aware of how racism impoverishes not just racialized people but all of us. We see the potential for what the Rev. Re. Martin Luther King called the beloved community. We don't settle for the comfort of what is, we live in hope, we imagine the power and joy of all that suppressed and oppressed potential flourishing and what it would mean for our community, our country, our world.

If we are to sustain this transformation and face racism head on as people of faith it needs to be rooted in the same truths that affirm Jesus, that sustain his commitment to be lead wherever love calls him. We realize that we are part of a long line of Christians and Christian Churches who speak and live into truth. While much evil is perpetuated in the name of Christianity for which all Christians must take responsibility, we can also claim as our lineage the slavery abolitionists of nineteenth century, the liberation movements in Central America, South Africa and Eastern Europe of the twentieth century, Tommy Douglas and the social gospel that brought us Medicare, Nellie McClung, the Methodist and United Church member who driven by her faith helped win the right for women to vote in Canada. The commitment to anti-racism places us in this lineage of Christian truth tellers and leaders. We also claim the blessing that we are God's beloved. This becomes a source of solace, a source of grounding and strength, our core identity. But once embraced it also becomes a call to ensure that the belovedness of all God's people is honoured, respected, and upheld.

Even remembering and embracing these tenets of the faith doesn't mean the path will be easy. It wasn't for Jesus. There will be times when it feels too hard, overwhelming, heartbreaking, and confusing. It certainly did for Jesus, alone in the Garden of Gethsemane pleading with God to take the cup from him. It will feel like death at times. The truth is a lot must die in us and our society. But we hold fast to the hope and faith that the pain is not in vain, that it's the pain of labour. Pain that leads to new life. It's the death of a seed that produces life nourishing fruit. It's the journey to Jerusalem, to the cross and the tomb in faith the Holy One will not leave us there, in faith that resurrection will come.

Love, whether expressed in a commitment to bring children into the world or embracing the anti-racist journey will transform us. Any parent knows, your world is never the same. The grace, the gift is to be a part of something greater than yourself, that even though you get battered and bruised at times, you have found something worth being battered and bruised for², something worth giving your life over. In the words attributed to Jesus, you find that you've lost your life in order to gain it. May it be so.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

¹ Matthew 16: 21

² Rev. Barbara Brown-Taylor in a sermon entitled Blessed Are the Upside Down, from her 1986 book Gospel Medicine, page 159.