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“Christ’s Transfiguring Presence” (excerpts from 3/6/11 “The Transfiguring Presence of Beauty)

Psalm 96:1-6 Matt 17:1-9

F.U.C.A.

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Each year, on Transfiguration Sunday, we return to this Gospel passage or the corresponding one in Mark or Luke and we again hear the story of Jesus climbing the hill with Peter, James and John. We get to see, in our imaginations, what this privileged three witnessed. Jesus’ garments become dazzlingly white and his face shines like the sun. Suddenly with him appear the prophets, Moses and Elijah. Peter responds to the brilliance and beauty of this moment of vision with an impulse, which is easily understood. He feels so blessed by what he has seen that he wants to hang on to it. “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Though the vision is only fleeting, he knows that it has changed his life forever and he tries to imagine what it would take to protect it and to prolong its magnificence. But suddenly, a bright cloud overshadows them and a voice speaks from the cloud, “This is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.” The dreamy beauty of the vision had been overwhelming enough, but the commanding voice from a cloud takes them over the emotional edge and they become prostrate with fear. Now, they are no doubt, ready to see the moment end that they had initially wanted to hold onto so tightly. Suddenly they understand that they have witnessed a vision, which cannot be contained. It cannot even be spoken about. Words won’t do it justice. Then, they simply follow Jesus down the mountain and return to their ordinary lives.

Like most of us, the disciples’ lives are determined in large part by their cultural time and place. Coming down the mountain, they must resume their daily routines and responsibilities and face all their unanswered questions, doubts, fears, hardships, and the grief that will soon come. But they have experienced a shining vision—a moment of indescribable beauty--an eternal moment that time cannot deny or erase. They have stood on the pinnacle in the radiant presence of eternity

and faced a luminous epiphany, which has pierced their souls forever. Witnessing the transfiguration of the Christ, their lives have also been transfigured.

Jonathan Edwards, the famous preacher of the Great Awakening of the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and probably America's most influential theologian spoke much about the importance of beauty to religious faith. He believed that God and beauty share creation together and each can be known through the other. God's truth is seen in the beauty of Christ, God's goodness, in human life as the beauty of the Holy Spirit. According to Edwards, each of us has as our primary calling to respond to the beauty of our being. The Transfiguration of Jesus was such a call of beauty for the disciples who witnessed it. This vision of Divine Beauty visited them fleetingly and unexpectedly and yet called them, forever, into new life.

What is beautiful to you? What has stopped you in your tracks and filled you with the transfiguring power of its beauty? Art, nature, children, color, architecture, the human body? It can be the simplest of things, and often is, a fleeting glimpse of the beautiful that, in one moment, impacts you in a lasting way

In his book, *Beauty, The Invisible Embrace*, the late Celtic priest, John O'Donahue, spoke of the transforming or transfiguring power of the presence of the beautiful in this life. "When we awaken to the call of beauty, we become aware of new ways of being in the world... Though Beauty only visits us and will not linger, it calls us to feel, think and act with more gracefulness in this world and to create and live a life that awakens the Beautiful... It is like a divine breath that blows the heart open. The Wonder of the Beautiful is its ability to surprise us."

Even before Christ, the ancient Greeks believed that Beauty, stood alongside Truth and Goodness as the great ideals-- the sublime nature and goal of all human deeds. Throughout the centuries Christianity has always held the banner of Truth and Goodness high, but has often failed to appreciate the spiritual value of Beauty and its transforming power for the human soul. Without Beauty, Truth and Goodness can only become sterile doctrinal truths. When not grounded in our "seeing" or "vision" or "felt experience" truth and goodness dry up becoming only brittle intellectual

beliefs. Law and ethics have a rightful place in a good society, but without the passion of beauty they are susceptible to misuse.

Beauty lives in the very depth of things. Beauty is not just a nicety, which can be added to real life like icing on a cake. It visits us in our suffering as well as our celebration. It makes its presence known at deathbeds, in soup kitchens, on battlefields and in refugee camps. In a split second, one is aware that the struggle they are in, however heart-rending has become a transfiguring one bestowing a gift of deep tranquility, an overwhelming feeling of love or gratitude, or a recognition of another's dignity and worth. When we are surprised by a sudden experience of the beautiful we are called forth, in that moment, to awaken to the holy order to all matters of earth and heaven.

The old adage, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," has a depth of meaning often missed. It is not just that everybody has his or her own taste. It means, rather, that beauty lies in our *capacity* to see. When Peter, James and John encountered the dazzling image of their teacher they saw life with new eyes—they gained a new capacity to see.

Beauty lives in the depths of all things. It is everywhere. Yet this 21<sup>st</sup> Century world is so badly in need of eyes to see its presence. Our spirits have become flattened as we have come to view ugliness as normal and acceptable. We are fed trivial and hollow stories by the media. The decadent lives of the rich and famous don't deserve the constant attention of the rest of us. We are bombarded with the rude words and mean-spirited deeds of political figures, celebrities, radio commentators, talk show hosts, troubled pastors and priests and have come to see their lack of civility as normal or at least as inevitable. We have accepted the unattractive and uninviting uniformity of corporate box stores, which are surrounded by masses of asphalt parking lots and are accessed only by automobile by highways exits all over our country. We shell out our money to watch movies with uninspiring story lines,

loathsome characters, offensive language and dehumanizing sexuality and violence, all of which most of us would make every effort to avoid in our own lives. We have replaced the majestic, the stately, and the charming in the furniture and architecture of public buildings with the functional, boxy, bland, and windowless. Did you know that the Greek root of the word “architecture,” literally means, “the weaving of a higher order.” The ancients knew that even the structures that a civilization built communicated their values and worldview. What do our windowless, graceless box stores say about our worldview? No, we don’t seem to understand the importance of the beautiful in our lives. We even go so far as to fear that to expect beauty in our lives appears elitist—That we are naïve to imagine that we should demand it.

It is not in doctrine but in experience that people encounter God. Jesus knew that his message would speak through this mountaintop vision in a way that would permit his disciples to “know” him more deeply. This vision of the transfiguration was a prefiguring of the resurrection to come. It was beautiful, real and true—but also ephemeral, fleeting and mysterious. The disciples could not contain and hold onto the truth of its beauty but it transformed their lives by opening their imaginations to divine truth.

One year ago today, on Transfiguration Sunday, we dedicated our beautiful banner to the glory of God. The banner was designed and made by a Canadian artist and was a memorial gift from the family and friends of Evelyn Sieling. The artist’s description of her work and her inspiration for it are explained in the bookmark in your hymnal. This lovely piece of art now greets each of us personally every time we enter the sanctuary, inviting us to meditate on its transfiguring beauty and to seek our own.

Focusing on this powerful event in the life of Christ in our worship each Transfiguration Sunday inspires us to recognize that all creation is included in this transformation. Moses’ presence in this vision recognizes the importance of the law, Elijah’s presence values prophetic truth and Jesus’ illumined figure offers to our

imaginations the beauty of what is holy in all of us. As we enter the season of Lent this week, with its movement through suffering to the cross, may this beautiful image of the transfigured Christ give us the courage to accept our failings even as we seek faithfully to face them through Lenten confession and surrender. May it carry us beyond our fears to truly trust in the power of our God—beautiful, good and true.