

Transfiguration B

“His face shone like the sun;” Matthew says, “and his garments became white as light.” Moses and Elijah were talking to him. There was a bright cloud overshadowing him and out of it a voice saying, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” The three disciples who witnessed the scene “fell on their faces, and were filled with awe” (Matthew 17:1-6). At Chautauqua this summer, we were filled with awe by the stories of Fr. Gregory Boyle, the Jesuit Priest who founded Homeboy Industries. He was the chaplain for one of the weeks.

According to their webpage, Homeboy Industries provides hope, training, and support to formerly gang-involved and previously incarcerated men and women allowing them to redirect their lives and become contributing members of our community. Each year over 10,000 former gang members from across Los Angeles come through Homeboy Industries’ doors in an effort to make a positive change in their lives. They are welcomed into a community of mutual kinship, love, and a wide variety of services ranging from tattoo removal to anger management and parenting classes. Full-time employment is offered for more than 200 men and women at a time through an 18-month program that helps them re-identify who they are in the world, offers job training so they can move on from Homeboy Industries and become contributing members of the community.

Fr. Boyle founded Homeboy and oversees much of its activity. He told us many stories of the horrors of the lives of the people he works with, and the miraculous transformations they undergo. One of the basic central tasks is to get the Homies to think they might be worthy of transformation, that they themselves are the beloved sons and daughters of God,

with whom God could possibly be well pleased. As with so many things, the ability to envision change precedes the achievement of change. So too all of us, can realize our place in the Circle of Life when we accept that each of us too is beloved of God; with whom God is well pleased. Thereby we too can become filled with awe.

It is as strange a scene as there is in the Gospels. Even without the voice from the cloud to explain it, they had no doubt what they were witnessing. It was Jesus of Nazareth all right, the man they'd tramped many a dusty mile with, whose mother and brothers they knew, the one they'd seen as hungry, tired, and footsore as the rest of them. But it was also the one they thought of as Messiah, the Christ, in all his glory. It was the holiness of the man shining through his humanness, his face so afire with it they were almost blinded.

Even with us something like that happens once in a while. The face of a man walking with his child in the park, of a woman baking bread, of sometimes even the unlikeliest person listening to a concert, say, or standing barefoot in the sand watching the waves roll in, or just having a beer at a baseball game in July. Every once and so often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it's almost beyond bearing.

In Christian teachings, the Transfiguration is a pivotal moment, and the setting on the mountain is presented as the point where human nature meets God: the meeting place for the temporal and the eternal, with Jesus himself as the connecting point, acting as the bridge between heaven and earth.

“Don't tell anyone **the vision** (*horama*)” until after the resurrection. *Horama* is used 11 times in the New Testament,

all but this one in Acts, and all are referring to a supernatural experience imparting information or instructions not available in any other way. From his Second Letter, we see that Peter must have understood the experience of awakening to the presence and pleasedness of God within us. This way, he asserts, they were privileged to be eyewitnesses of his glory.” **Jesus** did not change. His true identity was dramatically revealed to them (*emprothen auton*). And this revelation, whether by vision or some other means, is the beginning of the transformation of all who choose to follow him.

The Transfiguration also echoes the teaching by Jesus that God is not "God of the dead, but of the living". Although Moses had died and Elijah had been taken up to heaven centuries before, they now live in the presence of the Son of God, implying that the same return to life can apply to all who face death and have faith. We too can know the same truth – that we are beloved children – and that truth will set us free from whatever gangs we are parts of, and we too will be filled with awe. This change will be frightening, because such freedom is so unfamiliar; why awe-ful is a word used for God, and then becomes awful, as in bad.

That to be changed is an unfamiliar, frightening, and therefore bad thing to do, is the fundamental untruth of the human condition; the lie that keeps us enslaved. But if we cooperate with the central force of nature, the power we call God, or Love, in reestablishing our true frame of reference, we will reclaim the language we use to describe it, and know that to be filled with awe – to be awe-full is a very good thing indeed.

The presence of the prophets next to Jesus and the perceptions of the disciples have been subject to theological debate. Origen was the first to comment that the presence of Moses and Elijah represented the "Law and the Prophets",

effectively referring to the Torah or the Pentateuch. Martin Luther continued to see them as the Law and the Prophets respectively, and their recognition of and conversation with Jesus as a symbol of how Jesus fulfils the law and the prophets

The stories of our faith history – often called our salvation history -- enable us to conceptualize, contextualize and legitimize the stories we want to tell now. Today's readings are a perfect example. If we would incontrovertibly establish Jesus as the totality of the law and the prophets, we would do best by showing how he embodies the greatest attributes of the greatest heroes of the faith. Moses representing the law – and Jesus is shining just like him; Elijah being the quintessential prophet, and Jesus will be whooshed up into heaven like him.

So we get this great scene on the mountaintop, where the observing disciples see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah and we know that he has all the attributes of the two of them combined; he represents the culmination of their story, and so is taking over from them. As is so often the case, baseball provides a tasty analogy: Moses is the starting pitcher, laying down the law for the people and defeating their enemies, but he doesn't go all the way. Elijah, the manager, foresees that will happen; he has the entire confidence of the people in the owner's box. The two of them are out there at the top of the ninth, also known as "these latter days," they're out there -- on the mound -- (aka Mount Hermon) conferring, and they hand the ball to Jesus, the true reliever, the closer. Immediately, or 'straightway,' as the King James version so perfectly puts it, Luke has Jesus demonstrating his nature by defeating a nasty demon with a mere rebuke. Whereas all other scriptural heroes suit their actions to their words, in Jesus, the action is the word, and God's Word – Jesus' very self – is God's action.

Jesus says not to tell anybody about it – but to show them instead.

Luke's literary touch is especially deft: although we talk about today's feast as "The Transfiguration of Jesus," because the other two synoptic Gospels say he was transfigured (metamorphoo in the Greek), Luke describes the scene thusly: "...the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white...Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him." In other words, Jesus did not change, his true identity became apparent to them because they stayed awake. Such a revelation, whether by vision or some other means, is the beginning of the transformation of all who choose to follow him.

No wonder good old Peter wanted to put up some all-weather shelters and preserve the moment permanently. It's something we have been doing ever since. But notice Jesus does not permit it. Instead he goes back to the work of healing. If we are transformed or metamorphosed, even if we start to shine and our garments glister, if we begin to be changed by our encounters with the living God, we too must resist the temptation to merely preserve the awareness of glory and awe, and instead get awe-full ourselves, employ this power for the work of healing one another; get out and get on with the job of rebuking unclean spirits, ourselves, while life and voice shall last.