

“Perils of Glorification”
February 18, 2007
Preached by: Rev. Benjamin Broadbent

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent:

A couple of months ago I received an e-mail from the daughter of some members of our church, Kathy & Jerry White’s daughter, Erin. She was telling me that she had been invited by her congregation in Massachusetts to preach on February 18 and had e-mailed to ask me, “Is that Sunday of some kind of special importance in the Christian year?” And I wrote back and said, “It’s only ‘Transfiguration Sunday.’” And I think that because I have been preaching on Transfiguration Sunday for one reason or another for a number of years, it stands out in my mind, but I don’t know that it stands out as one of the primary holidays in the Christian liturgical year. But it is a very important Sunday. It is the turning point Sunday, the turning point between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent.

It’s a turning point, not only in the Christian liturgical year but in the ministry of Jesus and in the lives of everyone who lives their lives in orientation around Jesus – the disciples and we, the church. It is the time at which we realize that glory is not the end of the story. It’s not the only story.

We have enjoyed during the season of Epiphany Jesus’ baptism, some of Jesus’ miracles, including the changing of water into wine at the wedding of Cana. It has been a time of God revealing God’s self through manifestations of God’s glory. And now here we are. We are standing at the top of the mountain. Our clothing has turned white, and our faces are shining. This should be the end of the story. The ladder should descend just to where we are standing, and we should all help one another onto it and fly off in that spaceship. And that is the end of it.

It’s not the end of it. A cloud descends, not a ladder. Reality comes crashing back upon us, and we have to grapple with the perils of glorification. Yes, God is made manifest in wonderful, beautiful, surprising ways. But we may not cling to that glory as it is experienced in that moment. Rather, the glory becomes the very means by which we enter back into the world, back into lives as they are led. The clothes do not stay dazzling white forever. That’s a nice laundry metaphor. Faces do not always shine. For whatever reason, all of our countenances will fall, for this or for that circumstance.

In this story, Luke’s version of the transfiguration, we encounter the wonderful detail that the disciples on the mountain are “dog tired.” And I do not think it is because of altitude. Whatever mountain he may have been on, Mount Tabor, was probably not anywhere close to the altitude of our own Pikes Peak.

Perils of Glorification

February 18, 2007

I remember shortly after arriving in Colorado, Brooke and I made a very unwise decision to go with a group of people to hike to the top of Pikes Peak. This is four or five days after we arrive from sea level. And at the 16 Golden Stairs, 5,000 Gold Stairs more like it, I had the crushing thought that if I could just lie down here and just take a little nap, I would awake and have my energy restored. I don't know if someone told me this or if it was in my own mind, I heard the voice, "Yeah, yeah, that would be fine. You'll only die."

No, I think the disciples' issue was something other than altitude sickness. I think Heidi Neumark in an article she wrote for the Christian Century tells it best. She says:

I understand the weariness of the disciples on their trip up the mountain with Jesus. They must be exhausted by the non-stop demands of the crowds. Recently they were sent off with power and authority into the same needy crowds to cure, proclaim, and heal. And they've had an enviable run of successes and have returned to tell Jesus all about it. But when he takes them to withdraw privately for a well-earned rest, they are interrupted by more crowds, and the work of ministry continues. It's been a long day, and enough is enough. The weary disciples beg Jesus to send the crowd away, but you know what happens then. Fish and sandwiches for 5,000. Or more like 15,000, counting women and children. And when they finally get a day off, it doesn't feel much like a vacation. Jesus tells them about his upcoming great suffering, rejection, and death. Treatment that they all can expect as well. And about his rising on the third day. I don't blame them for missing the rising part. When you think you're heading for the dungeon, anxiety and panic tend to block out everything else.

So yes, it is a mountaintop experience, but they are exhausted. Luke also adds the detail that they are going to the top of the mountain to pray. So we know there is an intention to go and take some time, be set apart, spend some rejuvenating time with God. It is not what they had expected.

One more detail that Luke adds — you see, Luke used Mark's narrative. Then to speak to his own community and to use the stories that were being told within that community, he added these details. He added the detail of what exactly Elijah, Moses, and Jesus were talking about. If we just read Mark, we have no idea. But when we read Luke, we know that they are discussing his, Jesus, departure.

It is important to know that the word for departure in Greek is the same word used to refer to the exodus. So Jesus' departure, which we know are his

Perils of Glorification

February 18, 2007

suffering and his death on the cross, is the new exodus. Whereas the deliverance through the Red Sea for the people Israel was their deliverance from bondage and into a new and Promised Land. Jesus' exodus. His death on the cross becomes the means by which we, the church universal, are delivered out of our continuing bondage and into that new land. And there is – we have to come to grips with it – no other way. No ladder descending from on high. No other way off the mountain but to go back down it.

Today gives us a wonderful opportunity to ask the question, “What is the church?” What is the church universal? What are we about? And what place do we, as a local congregation, have within that?

It has been a year now, just past the anniversary since I began to serve as your Senior Minister. What a wonderful trip it has been. And I feel like I am finding my feet. But there has been a learning curve. It has been a wonderful one and sometimes difficult learning. We have been a people of welcome, wonder, and of witness. And this is both a statement of who we already are – the descriptive statement. And it also provides a vision and way forward.

I got these ideas, in fact, from the thinking of Douglass Fitch, who is the Senior Minister at Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. When we talk about extravagant wonder, we may think of Fitch's statement that “the church must be a place where God's love overflows. If God's love does not overflow, we may be assured it is not God's love. God gives love wastefully, extravagantly.”

And our expression of receiving that love is through our welcome. We are a church that welcomes folks in our community who have not found a place where they belong elsewhere. This is a wonderful witness to this community. But who are we still not welcoming? Are we truly welcoming to all? Are we truly willing to give that out wastefully? Are we willing on a daily basis to make the effort to actually welcome the person we do not recognize? Are we willing to allow a welcome that would be open to people who may not exactly fit in the fold of the way that we tend to think – politically, theologically, socially. Could the conservative evangelical come here and be him or herself? That would be an extravagant welcome.

I heard recently from a friend, a person of color, who said, “You know, I love First Congregational Church. It's just such a feeling there. But sometimes I receive an ‘over welcome.’ ‘We are so glad that you are here.’ ‘Hey, come over here and meet this person.’” And there are people flocking around them when all they intended to do was to come and worship God with God's people, not to have a fuss made over them. Could we move forward to a welcome where an over welcome would always be inappropriate, but rather a “mater of fact” welcome of everybody who came in the door?

Perils of Glorification
February 18, 2007

We are a people open to wonder. And I love the dual meaning in the wonder. It is both a sense of awe, a non-rational receiving of – I don't know what, I am just caught up in it now, and it envelops my whole body, and I don't even dare speak, because to speak would be to actually let go of the awe. But wonder also has a very rational side to it, as in, I wonder why these books for the Bible? I wonder why we do it this way or that way.

And I think both of those senses of it stem from, again, Douglass Fitch's notion that "in order to mature spiritually, people must have the freedom to explore." People must have the freedom to explore, and it is built into our very architecture. We do not have one central aisle. There are multiple aisles, multiple roads to God, and those multiple journeys are respected.

But what constraints do we put on our wonder? Perhaps some of us are so in the awe place that we are not altogether willing to engage in that intellectual inquiry. And some of us are perhaps so caught up in the "I wonder why," so in our heads, that we have yet to discover what a spiritual practice might actually transform in our lives.

We are a people of positive, proactive witness. We want to make a statement about what it could mean to be Christian that would have an extravagance to it, an unconditional love to it, an engagement with the world. That is, that we come together, not to just kind of celebrate within these four walls but to actually allow God's love to flow through us, that it might, in Fitch's words, "impact societal structures." That what we do here, what we celebrate here, what we share here might actually be shared with the wider world with a prayer of hope, a prayer of transformation.

There are some interesting statistics that have arisen in the past year. While we have had a greater than average Sunday attendance, our membership numbers have actually gone down. Have you noticed that in the annual report? Seven hundred twenty-nine members at the end of 2005; 709 at the end of 2006. I think this is a good thing. It points to, I think, two very good trends. One is that we are becoming clearer on what membership actually means – that step into "I am now ready to serve, to be among the community of the faithful, to minister to others."

But it also points to the fact that we do not expect membership in order to participate. You do not need to be a "member" in order to be a part of this community. Our walls are much more porous than that. Come and worship. You need not be a member. Come and be a part of the committee. You need not be a member. Come and be a part of the study group or the number of ministries that happen in and through this church. You need not be a member. But when you feel it placed upon your heart to take that step to say, "I'm ready to serve," then membership may be for you.

Perils of Glorification
February 18, 2007

We had an incredible stewardship drive this last fall, based on passionate possibilities and an incredible outpouring of giving. An incredible growth, I think, in starting to understand as a congregation what money means in our lives, what it makes possible, and how we often use it to harm or to manipulate a greater understanding of how money can lead to ministry.

Our local church pledge increased \$116,000, 29% over the previous year. Our mission giving pledges increased \$22,000, enabling this church to give to mission efforts in our local, national, and international communities. Our facility has had some wonderful care and some new things. The rose window, which was restored this fall. The pew cushions that you are sitting on. The roof was restored. The stones outside have been pointed and repaired. And we are moving now into a stage of restoring our beautiful sanctuary.

And on a lot of people's lips is the word "growth." There is both a sense of possibility and some fear around that word. You know, we lose as we grow our sense of belonging and the spirit that we feel when we are in this church. I can say that neither I nor anybody I have talked to has any interest in growing for its own sake, in becoming a big church for some kind of ego or prominence kind of purpose. What we are engaging in is responsible growth that is organic. That comes out of our natural ministry in this community. We are responsible in that we are responding to the growth that is happening organically and naturally, so that we can continue to extend extravagant welcome, so that we continue to be open to wonder, and so that we can continue to be enabled to offer a positive and proactive witness in our community.

Okay. So that was kind of a "State of the Church" address, after one year of Senior Ministry with you. But here is the caveat. As much as I try to build a little house to explain how things might have gone, Jesus says to Peter, "No, we have to go back down the mountain." You see friends, we exist – this is our faith claim – we exist to glorify God, not just on the mountaintop but every step coming down.

God is going out in front of us. God is already there, beckoning us on. We as a people, and we as a world, have some huge challenges ahead of us – environmental degradation. How many of you have felt that foreboding sense around global warming? Yeah.

The war, and how many more wars to come. Increasing poverty in our country, let alone just heart wrenching poverty that we get glimpses of throughout the world. We have some hard times ahead.

But our God is the God who does not escape off the top of the mountain. He goes back down the mountain and goes to those places. And if we are that

Perils of Glorification
February 18, 2007

God's people, we will go there with him. We will face even those darkest places in the world. We will take account of them in a very real way, and in those places we will speak a word of hope. You see, our God is the God who is heading down the mountain. He is not just going back home, but he is going to Jerusalem. He is not just going to Jerusalem, but he is going to Jerusalem to speak the truth, even to his death.

But that is not the end of the story. It is part of the story, and we must face it full on. There is no risen Christ without the crucified one. That is a part of our world. So we will go. We will go to the foot of the cross. We will then go home, and we will mourn. We will not pretend like it all goes away. The risen Christ is our lord, the one who will not turn back, the one who will not escape, the one who beckons us on, the transfigured one, offering the same transfiguration, transformation to all people.

Amen.