

Shortcuts Don't Mix with Love
The Last Sunday after Epiphany
February 27, 2022
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Heidi Neumark took a year off from Brown University to spend with a program called Rural Mission on Johns Island, off the coast of South Carolina. The most important lessons she learned that year came from an old woman named Miss Ellie, who lived miles down a small dirt road, in a one-room wooden home.

Heidi discovered that Miss Ellie's best friend was Netta, but in order to get to Netta's house Miss Ellie had to walk miles through fields of tall grass, infested with a variety of poisonous snakes. So, Heidi came up with a plan. She bought some planks and arranged for some men to help her build a bridge across a nearby stream.

Heidi dragged Miss Ellie from her rocking chair and shouted, "Look! A shortcut for you to visit Netta!" Miss Ellie's face did not register the grateful, happy look Heidi expected. Instead, Miss Ellie shook her head and looked at Heidi as though she was the one who needed pity. Miss Ellie said, "Child, I don't need a shortcut." She went on to explain that a shortcut would cut her off from Mr. Jenkins with whom she always swapped gossip, from Miss Hunter who so looked forward to the quilt scraps Miss Ellie would bring by, from the raisin wine she would taste in one place in exchange for Miss Ellie's biscuits, and from the chance to look in on the 'old folks' who were sick.

"Child," Miss Ellie said again, "can't take shortcuts if you want friends in this world. Shortcuts don't mix with love."

In today's passage from the Gospel of Luke, Peter wants to take a shortcut to glory. Like Heidi, he wants to build something right away – three dwellings to honor Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Like Heidi, he thinks God will be pleased with his idea. Instead, God appears as a cloud, thundering with the words, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!" Jesus leads Peter and the others through the cloud on the long and meandering road back down the mountain. There they encounter a concerned father who says words similar to those said by God the Father, "Look at my son, he is my only child." The father goes on to tell Jesus, "I begged your disciples to cast the demon out of my son, but they could not."

I wonder if the problem was not whether the disciples had the power to cast out demons like Jesus, but rather the problem was that the disciples failed to listen to this father as he told his story and explained what he needed. Jesus not only heals the son from his demon, he also works

to heal the disciples and us from our addiction to knee-jerk reactions and quick fixes. He invites them and us into the slower and more fulfilling path of taking the time to listen to God and each other.

The exchange with Miss Ellie about shortcuts stayed with Heidi when, in 1984, she became pastor of Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the South Bronx. The church had once been a vibrant community of Puerto Rican immigrants and their families. But redevelopment, environmental problems, and crime had taken their toll on the surrounding neighborhood.

Heidi recalls, "A rapid succession of pastors had come and gone. More members moved. Others died. The doors that once swung open in hospitality were now often covered with profane graffiti. They were fitted with larger locks to keep danger on the outside. There were only about twenty members left, but *they were a people in love.*"

Recalling the words of Miss Ellie, Heidi took the long way to walk around the entire South Bronx neighborhood, listening to the stories of the church members and those of her new neighbors. During those long walks Heidi asked teenagers and children if any of them would like to be part of an art class a friend had offered to help lead. Pretty soon, she had a group of young artists show up. Together, they read stories from the Bible, which the kids illustrated with a mural on those previously locked church doors. The mural shows an open fire hydrant with water splashing down into a baptismal font. Water brims and spills from the bowl onto the grass below as new buildings rise up from the sidewalk. An arm reaches out from the altar, with bread to place on a plateful of food – turkey, greens, and rice for the hungry. Across the top of the doors is a line from the prophet Isaiah: "My house shall be a house of prayer for all people." People came by to see the mural and cheer on the kids, and not a stroke of graffiti has since appeared on the doors. The families of the children and others who passed by started coming to worship at the church.

Heidi's listening skills were again put to the test when she faced the good problem of how to blend a congregation of African-American and Latino parishioners as a white pastor who had to build trust with everyone. None of this happened quickly or easily. Heidi stayed as pastor of Transfiguration for 19 years. Instead of staying locked inside those muraled doors, she challenged herself and the members to get out into the neighborhood, listen to the stories, and find ways to make long-term differences in the lives of the people. Over time, Transfiguration led the way in transforming the South Bronx through innovative education and community development.

Our news over the last couple of weeks has been dominated by the unfolding crisis in Ukraine. As we see the images of people bombarded and displaced, our hearts and prayers go out to the citizens of Ukraine. I hope and pray there is a short-term solution to stop aggression and end the violence and suffering. This crisis also prompts us to examine long-term questions:

What actions do we take to support the freedom of allies?
What sacrifices are we willing to make for the freedom of others?
And who will be making those sacrifices?
How do we help those displaced to rebuild their lives?
These are not easy questions.

In the midst of all the news from Ukraine, you may have missed a *local* news item. On February 15th, Bishop Phoebe announced that the Church Home Board of the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee has awarded a \$145,000 grant to Literacy Mid-South for an innovative program designed to boost third grade reading levels in our city and region. This grant is due in part to listening to David Waters, journalist and our adult forum speaker the last 2 weeks, and his wife Robin, a concerned educator. They have shared how low third grade reading levels lead to a dangerous spiral of poverty, crime, addiction, and trauma throughout Memphis and West Tennessee.

Our diocese is making a major commitment to be a part of the long-term solution to improve third-grade reading levels. Not just with money, but with **us** as volunteers on the front line of the literacy crisis in our area. You will be hearing more about opportunities to serve in the days ahead.

Heidi Neumark reflected on how Transfiguration Church lived into its name: “When Peter and the others came down from the mountain, they found a father and child grasping for life. Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And they found transfiguration. And so it is. When the disciples of this Bronx church unlocked the doors of their private shelter and stepped out into the neighborhood, they did meet the distress of the community convulsed and mauled by poverty. But they also discovered transfiguration as a congregation in connection with others.” She adds, “Living high up in the rarefied air isn’t the point of transfiguration. It was never meant as a private experience of spirituality removed from the public square. It was a vision to carry us down, a glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level.”

Transfiguration will most often happen that way for us too. Down here at ground level. Usually not in quick fixes, but on the long and meandering path of truly listening to and entering the stories in our neighborhoods. Transfiguration happens when we at long last learn - ‘shortcuts don’t mix with love.’ *Amen.*