

## The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

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So here's little unsolicited advice. If you happen to be an Episcopal priest whose parish is finishing up its largest renovation project in over thirty years, and a date is being chosen for a Sunday celebration, check the lectionary readings you'll be expected to preach on. I mean, did anybody else notice that when Peter proposes a modest building project of three dwellings for the prophets at the Transfiguration, it's met with an awkward silence?

The narrator wants to make sure we understand what a royally bad idea this was, so he interrupts the scene with the commentary "...not knowing what he said." The NRSV — that is, the New Revised *Southern* Version of the Bible translates the original Greek as, "Well, bless his heart."

But my heart kind of goes out to Peter every time I read the story. Doesn't yours? On a walk the other day, Ardelle and I started talking about that little reel of the dumbest things you ever said that plays in your head from time to time. Anybody else have one of those?

Well, imagine you're at the mountain top experience by which all other mountain top experiences will be measured, with the greatest prophets of your faith tradition miraculously in attendance somehow, and the one thing you manage to blurt out is the wrong thing. Not only that, it gets recorded in a book that, 2,000 years later, will be a sacred text for about 2.4 billion people on earth. The mountain top experience might have become a cliché for ... well ... I guess for putting your foot in your mouth.

One of my seminary profs used to say if the text you're preaching on is a shoe, pay attention to the place where it pinches your foot. So, even if we think Peter deserves a break, let's trust the text enough to wonder what was going on when his proposal to construct dwellings that day fell so flat. And let's even wonder whether there's

something relevant here to our lives. Even today. Even as we give thanks for a construction project that did come to fruition.

The story of the Transfiguration comes up twice during the Church year. We read it on the last Sunday After the Epiphany, which is today. It's also read on August 6, which is the Feast of the Transfiguration, and also happens to be the day Calvary Church was founded back in 1832. Interesting, isn't it? Our spiritual forebears here actually chose Transfiguration as the day to establish this congregation. Or maybe they just forgot to check the lectionary too.

In the Orthodox Church, there is a tradition of blessing fruit, often grapes, on the Feast of the Transfiguration. They do this because Peter's blunder suggests it may have taken place during Sukkot, the Jewish feast of booths. To this day, some Jews construct temporary shelters and eat their meals in them for a week during Sukkot. It's a feast that recalls life in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt. A time of liberation from enslavement, but also a time when a people had no permanent homes. A time of utter dependence on God for the daily provision of manna and quail. When a rabbi named Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," surely the defining collective memory of the Exodus sat just beneath the prayer's surface.

Sukkot is also a celebration of the first fruits of the fall harvest, which is why Orthodox Christians bless grapes at Transfiguration. So, if Peter was proposing the construction of booths for Sukkot that day on the mountain, it was also a time to remember the practice of giving back the first tenth of one's harvest to the community. This is the ancient practice of tithing. It's letting go of the first of what we've received, not as a grim religious obligation, but as a communal gratitude practice. A reminder that we still have something in common with those ancient wanderers in the wilderness. We too live each day of our lives as recipients of God's gifts, utterly dependent on the fruitfulness of the earth and the work of other people's hands.

So it's not for nothing that Moses was one of the prophets on the mountain that day. He's the one who led the Hebrew people out of enslavement in Egypt and into a life of total dependence on God in the wilderness. A time in which his people experienced the earth as a place of divine gift again, even if they could be grumpy and ungrateful recipients at times. So can we.

Moses was also the prophet who returned from that earlier mountaintop experience on Sinai with a shining face and the tablets of the Law. The Law being, not a set of arbitrary rules. But a way of forming a community of gift even in a world that seems to run on scarcity and fear.

The Law would grow to establish, not only the gratitude practice of giving back the first fruits, but the instruction not to glean to the corners of your field. Because a foreigner might come into your life in need of food or shelter, and you know what that's like. You were strangers in a strange land once. Slaves even. But God delivered you with a mighty hand. So don't live by Pharaoh's rules. Live as the gifted bearers of God's image that you are. Such was the deep wisdom of the Torah. Such is the life Moses and Elijah and Jesus kept calling people back to in different places, different times, is it not?

But what does any of this have to do with one Christian congregation's building project centuries later, not in Memphis, Egypt, but in some far-off place called Memphis, Tennessee? Well, everything, I hope.

Because, Moses didn't return from Sinai with a way of life for a realm where the streets are gold and the gates are made of great big pearls. And Elijah didn't prophesy instructions for how to summon fiery chariots when it's our time to go. They taught us how to live lives of hospitality and justice and mercy in the ordinary exchanges of life on this very earth. And the Transfiguration was nothing if not the announcement that Jesus was stepping into that long tradition of living according to the abundant Kingdom of God, not the empire's violent realm of scarcity and threat. Jesus and the prophets before him said there really is another way to live.

And, it seems to me at least, that what you believe is ultimately true about our lives will shape even what you build in this world. If you believe life is a war, then build a bunker. Hunker down and protect yourself from the threatening other who is coming for what you cling to as your own.

But if you believe the prophets when they say life is a divine gift, and that each human being you meet is the gifted bearer of an immortal soul of infinite worth, well, it might make sense to take down more walls than you put back up when you build. It might make sense to widen the passageways between the various aspects of our common life and build ramps for gifted people who travel through this world by

different means. You might make light-filled, open spaces where welcome and hospitality are more easily extended to a stranger or to a friend. You also might just build something beautiful. Because there may be no other practice more subversive to the realm of scarcity than to make something beautiful just because you can, and just because that beauty might lift the soul of the next person who encounters it.

There's one more thing I want to say today about the life I believe Jesus and Elijah and Moses still call us to. If you step onto a construction site like Calvary's in 2025, you'll provably hear Spanish being spoken. On a given day, it's possible that, of the people working skillfully with their hands, physically constructing whatever's being built, fully half of them will have grown up in a home in which English was not the first language. If your trust is in the realm of scarcity where Pharaoh and Caesar rule by fear, then you'll probably assume the one who is foreign to you must be a threat and an enemy. They're coming for your jobs or your culture or anything else the emperor might have you imagine to keep you afraid, suspicious, dependent on the empire's might for protection.

But if Jesus and the prophets are to be trusted, this is just a form of the original lie we started telling ourselves back in that mythical garden, where everything changed when we turned our attention from all that had been given to us abundantly, and grasped for the one thing that had not. Jesus said don't live by that lie, and don't live by the emperor's values, even if it costs you your life. If you do, the life you save won't have been the abundant life you were made for.

The truth about the nature of our lives, and the truth about who God actually created us to be goes so deep in the human experience, it doesn't even have to be told in religious language. Look around at what's happened here.

What's happened is that people from all sorts of different stories and backgrounds, on many days, packed up their tools and lunches in the morning dark and drove to Calvary. They cut through walls and widened doorways, not metaphorically, but actually. They nailed up baseboards and finished sheetrock and installed flooring and painted walls and plumbed sinks and pulled wires. Every single day gifted people, who were strangers to us when this project began, left behind good work that will bless generations of people in this place. And at the end of each day, they swept up the sawdust they'd made, rinsed paint from their brushes, loaded up their pipe wrenches and

trowels and drills and went back to their various homes and lives, leaving behind everything they'd made that day right here, for us to live in.

I trust that each one of them received a fair wage for their labor. But that takes nothing from the essential miracle they've told us all over again about the true nature of our lives. Which is that God calls us to open up our lives — our buildings and our communities as well, I believe — to those we've been told to fear and exclude, because we still inhabit an abundant creation that is nothing but a great web of gift. And every human being you'll ever meet is a necessary filament in that web, made by God to bear gifts into other lives, just as you and I were made by God to bear gifts to whoever we meet along our way.

So, today, I think I'll risk sidling up next to Peter and pray, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. Right here. In this time and this place. This city block. This building. Because we've caught a glimpse right here how this abundant, gifted world of yours can work. Keep us faithful to the ways of the abundant realm of God in the days ahead. Remind us that the evidence that life is a gift we receive from other hands is all around us all the time. Give us eyes to see it. Then give us the courage and joy and gratitude and faith to give the life you've given us through them right back away to whoever we encounter next in this world that you still so fervently love."