

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 17:1-9

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalms 2

2 Peter 1:16-21

February 23, 2020

The Last Sunday after Epiphany

This past week, Camden came home from school and announced that he was writing a research paper on the Kingdom of God. Of course, my ears perked up. Ahh, I thought, maybe he has been listening to my sermons all of these years after all. Being a clergy kid might actually be having an impact.

Just to be clear, Camden is required to take a Bible class at St. Christopher's. It really isn't something he felt compelled to do (even though I like to think he was really enthusiastic about it.) But, a paper on the Kingdom of God? So, of course, I had to ask him, why did you choose the Kingdom of God as your topic? Camden frowned and said, there were a list of topics on the board and I had to pick one. Well, I said, do you know what the Kingdom of God is all about? Camden responded...I have no idea.

And so, the research began.

When the boys were growing up, we were often "that" family. Some of you have heard me tell this story before. I was the mom who always brought her kids to church in tattered pants, untied shoes, and stained shirts. There was usually a cowlick or two in their uncombed hair (actually, it's much the same today). A little jam on their faces and dirt on their hands. One was always grumpy, one in tears. We were a site to see.

And then there was that other mom – whose kids came in all proper with freshly pressed button up shirts, little sports coats, neatly combed hair and they always talked in their church voices. I dreaded seeing those families. We couldn't measure up no matter how hard we tried.

Yet, we came to church as we were. Rumpled and worn out but wanting to know something of God.

Our misfit image was solidified one Easter Sunday at St. Stephen's Church in Richmond when Camden, who was in 3rd grade at the time, in his wrinkled pants and untucked shirt told me he wasn't feeling too well and minutes later proceeded to throw up all over the church patio at the nice Easter reception with those very properly dressed children looking on. Everyone stepped back with an expression of subdued displeasure.

We went home feeling defeated. Did it really have to be that hard? If only, we could have it all together like those other families. If only we had clean clothes and smiling faces. If only no one was cutting us the side eye of disappointment.

However, that Easter Sunday reminded me that trying to achieve such perfection and acceptability is not at all what the Kingdom of God is all about. And so, we went back the next week and I prayed no one got sick.

As I read the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus this week, I thought there was an important lesson about the Kingdom of God tucked inside this strange, other worldly event. Something that my disheveled expression of faith might learn from - The perfectly clean Jesus and the rest of us.

Two things we notice at first glance...Jesus is on a mountain top and Jesus starts to shine in an inexplicable way. You might say he was kind of like those well put together church folks that I so wanted to be like. I imagine him ethereal and peaceful...a true image of divine goodness, floating around and smiling. In fact, his image was so good that Peter was determined to contain it, to keep Jesus clean and untarnished. Peter wanted to build a shelter for Christ to dwell, protected, right there on the mountain. Safe and acceptable. Proper and polished.

Of course, we know that Jesus doesn't stay so pristine and he doesn't stay on the mountain. Perfection and social acceptability wasn't his goal. Staying clean and proper was not what interested him. He knew he had to descend the mountain and move into the depths of humanity in all of its brokenness, in all of its pain, in all of its need. I bet his clothes got dirty, too.

If we truly pay attention to the story of the Transfiguration, we must recognize that our faith is never meant to stay there, in a place of separateness. We are all meant to go down the mountain and get a little dirty. Faith is not a never ending mountain top experience, nor is about a perfect moment of religious bliss. It's not about the right achievements, the right image, the right clothes. If we think that way, we will be disappointed.

Because sometimes it's all about getting sick on the patio at a lovely Easter reception to remind us that the Kingdom of God says just come as you are. The broken, the dirty, the tired. Because God's love can't be contained on a mountain. It comes down to be with us...however we may show up.

So, how did Camden do on describing the Kingdom of God? Well, he gave me permission to share this with you. He wrote,

"I imagine the Kingdom of God as a place where no violence occurs. Everybody has the right to be who they want to be and nobody forces them to be someone different. The Kingdom of God would have to be a place where no poverty is found. Nobody has to live on the streets and people have the money that they need. Everybody has enough food for them to live happily and healthy....Everybody should be loved by at least someone. Love is a necessity to keep people happy."

Not bad for someone who thought they didn't know anything about the Kingdom of God.

And, of course, he added, *“People should be able to not have to deal with the everyday stress of school on any level.”*

We’re getting there. It’s a journey for all of us. We just have to be ready to listen, to accept God’s love in our lives and be ready to come as we are. Not on a mountain top but on the rocky paths and deep valleys and sun-filled meadows of life, even on church patios with upset stomachs. The Kingdom of God says you are loved just as you are.

Amen.