

Last Sunday in Epiphany; Mark 9:2-9
Transfiguration Sunday; February 11, 2018
The Rev. Devon Anderson

Father Greg Boyle is a Jesuit priest, author, and founder of the largest gang member rehabilitation program in the country, Homeboy Industries. Early in his priesthood he spent a year in Bolivia, and there experienced a transfiguration. “It was a gracious time,” he writes, “that changed me forever.” As he tells it, Boyle’s Spanish was quite poor and the year in Bolivia was intended for language study and ministry. “I could celebrate the Eucharist in Spanish,” he says, “but I was a slave to the missal.” A few weeks after his arrival, Boyle was approached by a group of health workers and asked to celebrate Mass in Tirani, a Quechua community located high above the town, whose indigenous inhabitants harvested flowers for market. It was common to see campesinos making the long trek from Tirani with a huge weight of flowers tied to their backs. Like beasts of burden, they were doubled over all the way down the mountain to town.

Tirani had not seen a priest in over a decade. The health workers asked Boyle to celebrate the Mass in Spanish, and a worker would preach in Quechua. The workers picked Boyle up at the bottom of the mountain at 1:00 on a Sunday afternoon. He hopped into the back of the open-air truck with the others, and up they climbed. Midtrek, Boyle took an inventory of the contents of his backpack. To his horror, he had brought everything he needed *except* a missalette. He couldn’t swing Mass in Spanish. He did have a Spanish Bible in his bag, and he began to flip frantically through the pages, searching for any passage with words like “bread,” “wine,” or “take and eat.”

“Soon,” writes Boyle, “my body was introducing me to the marvels of flop sweat – I was red in the face and stingy hot.” They pulled into a huge, open-air landing, a field cleared of all crops, with many hundreds of Quechua Indians seated in concentric circles around a table. The service began and “after the sermon,” Boyle recalls, “it was my turn to carry the ball. I was like someone who’s been in a major car accident: I couldn’t remember a thing.” Boyle scrambled for his crib sheet scrawled with random notes and stolen scriptural quotations, all the while lifting the bread and wine whenever he ran out of things to say. “It would be hard to imagine the Mass having gone any worse.”

“When it was over, I was spent and humiliated,” he writes, “I was wandering adrift, trying to gather my shattered self back together again, when a female health worker walked an ancient Quechua woman up to me.” “She hasn’t gone to confession in ten years,” she explained. The health worker left the old woman with Boyle who proceeded to unload a decade’s worth of sins in a sing-songy, rapid-fire Quechua Boyle didn’t understand. When it was all over, Boyle turned to find that he had been abandoned and the field where Mass had been celebrated was completely vacated. There he was - alone on the mountain top, not only without a ride, but in stultifying humiliation, convinced that a worse priest had never visited that place or walked the earth.

With his backpack slung over his shoulder and spirit deflated, Boyle began to make the long walk back down to town. But before he left the field, an old Quechua campesino, seemingly out of nowhere, made his way to Boyle. “He appeared ancient,” writes Boyle, “but I suspect his body had been weathered by work...As he neared me, I saw he was wearing tethered wool pants, with a white buttoned shirt, greatly frayed at the collar. He had a rope for a belt. His suit coat was coarse and worn. He had a fedora on his

head and huaraches on his feet [which were] caked with Bolivian mud...He stood right in front of me and said, 'Tatai,' which is a name kind of like 'Father' but intimate and full of affection. 'Tatai,' he said and then, in Spanish: 'Thank you for coming.'

"I thought of something to say, but nothing came to me," says Boyle. "Which is just as well, because before I could speak, the old campesino reached into the pockets of his suit coat and retrieved two fistfuls of multicolored rose petals. He was on the tips of his toes and gestured that I might assist with the inclination of my head. And so, he dropped the petals over my head, and I was without words. He dug into his pockets again and managed two more fistfuls of petals. He did this again and again, the store of red, pink and yellow rose petals infinite. I just stood there and let him do this, staring at my own huaraches, now moistened with my tears, covered in rose petals...For all the many times I returned to Tirani and saw the same villagers, over and over, I never saw this old campesino again...God is more expansive than every image we think rhymes with God," reflected Boyle years later, "How much greater is the God we have than the one we *think* we have?"

Father Boyle's experience on that mountain was none other than his transfiguration – a deeply intimate, unique, mysterious, life-changing interaction with the living God, a connection and affirmation that changed him forever, and from which he launched his ministry in the barrios of Los Angeles. Today is the last Sunday before the season of Lent, and every year, no matter what, we read the Gospel story of *Jesus'* transfiguration – the moment Jesus climbed the mountain, was consumed with light and power, felt the full presence of God, and walked back down the mountain a changed man. As theologian Sam Portaro puts it, "the Transfiguration is an artistic struggle to give voice to an intangible insight." We don't know exactly what happened in the cloud. But we do know that God surrounded Jesus, overcame him, took his breath away, set his heart on fire. And we know that that encounter with God changed him profoundly. "After that strange experience on the hill," Portaro writes, "Jesus possessed something he had not known or evidenced before. He bore within and expressed without the unmistakable assurance of one who knew his place; he knew he was loved and chosen by God. That knowledge was his authority and the core of his integrity; he knew it so surely, he could never relinquish it, even to the power of death. He was changed, and everyone who saw him saw that change. He was transfigured. The brooding shadow of doubt – doubt over his own place in God's order and affections – was replaced (forever) by the clear light of assurance."

The Gospels tells us precious few details about Jesus' transfiguration. In fact, most of the story is about the disciples misinterpreting what happened to Jesus, and being afraid. We don't know what was said, how it felt, whether Jesus was scared or exhilarated, how Jesus interpreted the moment, how he absorbed the experience, how it affected his choices and direction and when that began to happen. Though Father Boyle's transfiguration story offers us details like rose petals and rope belts, we also don't really know how he interpreted the experience, or who the campesino was, or how Boyle translated that moment into the call to the ministry to which he eventually would dedicate his life. And I think this vagueness that clouds experiences of transformation is by design. I think mystery is intentional. Because transfiguration isn't external. There's really not that much to see on the outside. No, transfiguration – transformation - is something that happens inside of us, something intensely personal and unique to each one of us. Because it's down deep inside of ourselves that God meets us, that God comforts, provokes, assures, and calls us. The contemporary Christian mystic Thomas Merton once wrote, "At the center point of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point of spark which belongs entirely to God." It is only through that point of

nothingness -- that “immortal diamond” within each of us, as theologian Richard Rohr calls it -- that we both receive God and are changed by God. It happens there, in that place inside, there all along in the center of our being.

So, for me, the key question of the Transfiguration is this: how do I, how do we, get to that place within ourselves? We will pursue this question during Lent this year at Trinity: what are paths to this place within ourselves where we meet God? You’ll see “path” imagery woven throughout our Sunday morning worship. Adult Faith Formation offerings will focus on learning about, and experiencing, paths to this inner life. If we’re hungry enough for that kind of connection, it will take some work and intentionality on our part. Visiting this place within ourselves requires receptivity and openness, a little patience and a pinch of courage. Our transfiguration will not look like Jesus’, nor anyone else’s. None of us will likely find ourselves surrounded by God’s bright shining light on a mountain, or receive a rose petal blessing from a stranger. Most times, transformation is more of a slow burn than a flash of light.

But if we seek paths to this place within ourselves, God promises to meet us there, and will change our lives from the inside out. “The Gospel of Jesus,” wrote Marcus Borg, ‘is that there is a way of being that moves beyond both secular and religious conventional wisdom. The path of transformation of which Jesus spoke leads from a life of requirements and measuring up to a life of relationship with God. It leads from a life of anxiety to a life of peace and trust. It leads from the bondage of self-preoccupation to the freedom of self-forgetfulness. It leads from life centered in culture to life centered in God.’”

And finally, we can think about the space within ourselves, our “immortal diamond” like this: When we were in Ireland this past summer, we took a “Pub Tour” in Dublin – which was not so much about drinking Guinness as it was learning about Irish music in the pubs that the locals frequent. At each stop we’d encounter different musicians who told us about their instrument, and how they fit into the mix of ensemble pub music. An Irish Harp player told us that if you have two harps in a room, a large harp and a little harp, if the little one is out of tune, as the larger one is tuned, its resonance actually brings the smaller one with it. One need not physically tune the little harp – it’s affinity and proximity to the big harp drowns out the other noises and influences around it, and it comes naturally in sync with its higher power. So, too, with God. Over against the world with all its turbulence, distraction, and worry, we will be invited this Lent to go within ourselves, finding a path and cultivating a style of mind that can reach through to an inner stillness within ourselves, in tune with God. As the mystic Meister Eckhart said: The world cannot ruffle the dignity of a soul that dwells in its own tranquility. Where the path down deep into ourselves will lead, no one knows. But walking the path, I am sure, will begin to pervade our seeing, change the way we experience the world around us, and bring into our midst the living God. AMEN.

Sources:

Opening story comes from: *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, by Gregory Boyle, pp. 37-39.

Thomas Merton quote comes from: *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and his Message*, by Cynthia Bourgeault, p. 43.