

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson at Pilgrim Church: 2/3/08
Scripture: Matthew 17:1-9

“Mountaintop”

From the text: *“Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. “*

A bad joke....During a recent church ecumenical gathering, one of the attendees suddenly saw smoke rising from a trash can. "Fire!" she yelled. So the Methodists wrote a hymn about the fire of the Holy Spirit. The Baptists panicked: "Where's the water?" Quakers sat quietly and praised God for the blessings of fire. Lutherans nailed a note to the front door declaring that fire was evil. Roman Catholics passed the plate to cover the damages. Fundamentalists proclaimed, "It's the vengeance of God!" Episcopalians formed a lovely procession and marched right out. Presbyterians appointed a chairperson who was to appoint a committee to look into the matter and submit a written report about the alleged "Fire". And finally, the UCC'ers, the Congregationalists, well they just shouted, "'Every man for himself!"

Told you it was bad and yet all those religious clichés have a hint of truth in them, even the crack about us UCC folks. We are the ones who have that most democratic form of ecclesiastical governance, one we'll exercise today at our Annual Meeting. One member, one vote, no one more or less important than any other, each with an equal say in our affairs. At best this way of doing God's business ensures that everyone is heard. But always the question in such radical democracy—whether in a church or a town meeting or a family or a nation is this: can we balance self-interest with “other” interest? Can we speak up not just for me and what I want but also for thee and what my neighbor desires? Can we move beyond being a mere collection of “I”, “me’s” and “mines” and arrive at a place of unity? Instead of just declaring every man for himself, can we instead remember finally, that we are all in this together, together. As one faith family; one town; one country; just one world.

I know as I prepare to vote this Tuesday, in what many feel is the most important election in a generation, I worry much less about partisan party politics than about the ability of someone, any one to call us back as a nation to this one radical civic notion, one we all learned about in grammar school that made and makes America great: E Pluribus Unum...from many one, from many one. That my friends is always the challenge when two or more people are gathered to live together, to work together, to worship together, to love together, to be a community together.

This image of the tension between “I” and “we” came to me as I read today's story of Jesus' transfiguration. God calls Jesus to a mountaintop, to take his place next to the great Jewish prophets Moses and Elijah. But Jesus doesn't go it alone, doesn't trek solo up that that lofty place. Instead he takes his friends, Peter and James and John, teaching us, I believe, that spiritual transformation is never just a lone ranger affair.

Instead it's always about finding God in community, community, with two or more, in relationship, relationship. Sure: it's always tempting to picture Jesus as this lone God warrior, a lonely traveling teacher walking dusty roads on his own and yet. Could Jesus have done his work without community? Without his best friend Mary to listen to him talk about his day? Without trusty Peter to encourage him? I don't think so.

For at some point in the midst of our individualism and individual debate, the best communities always finally consider: what is good for all us and not merely me? The wisest communities always remember that everyone must be cared for and watched out for: not just the folks with the loudest voices or the most power. The most joyful communities finally declare that God makes us to be first and foremost to be in relationship with one another, even, especially in the midst of our diversity.

I must say, after almost six months among you as Pastor, the gift that that brought me here still shines: your ability to be in deep and real community as a church. I'm amazed (and you should be too) at the ability of this church to stay and to hang together especially these past five years or so, as Ken was sick, as you went through two interims, you all hung tough and hung in and kept on that road up the mountain together, together. Thank God!

It is never easy to be in an intentional community like Pilgrim church. We're all so darn different: young and old, gay and straight, rich and not so rich and just getting by, long time local and brand new transplant, parents and singles, classical music lovers and rock and rollers. Always the risk in such a diverse community of souls is that we might fracture, or want to walk separately on different roads, or forget about the folks we share these pews with each Sunday and the folks we need to serve out there in the world: homeless Metrowest families and single Moms who feel isolated and unemployed workers who feel so alone and yet--here is Jesus. The one who was never just one: born of a human mother; grew up in a family of brothers and sisters; attended Temple surrounded by his community; who gathered fishermen and housewives and soldiers and tax collectors who never before had been asked to hang out with all those "other" folks. But in Jesus God simply says, "You are all in this together, together. No solo acts. No lone rangers. No me and mine. It's We. We. In God."

From many, one. In this spirit God calls us into a new program year, always looking back and thanking God for all the ones who have walked with us and looking ahead in joy as we climb that mountain again, together, with Jesus Christ leading the way! Let all in this community say, "Amen!"