

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **A Foretaste of a New Creation**

*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!* — Matthew 17:1-9

There are three times in the life of Jesus, according to Matthew's gospel, when Jesus encounters God in a very special way. The first is at his baptism, when God speaks from heaven and says: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." And then Jesus is led out into the desert to be tempted. The third is the resurrection, which comes, of course, three days after his excruciating death on a cross. But the second is the story we tell today, at the transfiguration, which comes just after Jesus has been talking with his disciples about his upcoming death and has gotten into a big argument about it with Peter, who simply couldn't accept that Jesus would have to die. And when Moses and Elijah come and speak to him, they weren't chatting about the weather – according to Luke's gospel they were talking about his death. And then the voice comes from heaven saying, "Hey Peter, listen up! He knows what he's talking about when he says he's going to die." In every case it seems the moment of revelation is closely linked to the experience of suffering. The baptism is linked to the wilderness temptation; the resurrection to the crucifixion, and the transfiguration to the anticipation of the crucifixion.

I think it is of true of our lives as well that it is the moments when we are most closely in touch with the pain of life that we really experience the most profound joy. It has certainly been my experience that in grief and loss, when families gather, there are tears, but there is also laughter, and as they tell stories about the person who has died, they laugh until they cry and cry until they laugh. I have often observed that people who are dying, or who have just lost a loved one are able to appreciate and celebrate life more deeply precisely because they are so aware of its fragility. Tears are a sign of both profound joy and utter despair and grief. Some people cry at weddings and its really hard to tell whether they're really happy or whether they're an old flame of the groom. It seems that sorrow and joy are both close to the heart of life, and as different as they are, they are strangely linked.

Edwin Markham once wrote: "Only the soul that knows the mighty grief / Can know the mighty rapture. Sorrows come / To stretch out spaces in the heart for joy."

Most of us go through life trying to avoid pain. That's fairly natural. But if we try so hard to avoid pain that we never make ourselves vulnerable to getting hurt, then we will never experience either the pain or the joy which life has to offer. Do you remember the song by Simon and Garfunkel?

If I never loved, I never would have cried ...  
I touch no one and no one touches me ...  
I am a rock, I am an island ...  
and a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries.

Rabbi Harold Kushner believes that this pathological fear of experiencing pain is responsible for the sense that many people have that their lives are meaningless and empty. He writes:

If we believe that in order for life to be good, we have to avoid pain, the danger is that we will become so good at not feeling pain that we will learn not to feel anything - not joy, not love, not hope, not awe. We will become emotionally anesthetized. We will learn to live our whole lives within a narrow emotional range, accepting the fact that there will be a few high spots in our lives in exchange for the guarantee that there will be no low moments either, no pain or sadness, just a perpetual feeling of monotony, one gray day after another.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Barrett Browning said something similar when he wrote: "Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." The pop song "The Rose" suggests: "It's the heart afraid of breaking that never takes the chance / It's the soul afraid of dying that never learns to dance." Jesus knew that, long ago, when he said: "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses her life for my sake will find it." It is in opening ourselves to the possibility of being hurt that we open ourselves to the possibility of living life. It is in opening ourselves to the possibility of pain that we open ourselves to the possibility of joy. It is in opening ourselves to the possibility of being vulnerable that we open ourselves to the possibility of love.

On the door of my office hangs a card that Therese got me after a particularly difficult period in my life. It is titled "Dare to Risk" and it reads like this:

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool.  
To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.  
To reach for another is to risk involvement.  
To expose your ideas, your dreams, before a crowd is to risk their loss.

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<sup>1</sup> *When Everything You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*

To love is to risk not being loved in return.

To live is to risk dying. To believe is to risk failure.

But risks must be taken, because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.

The people who risk nothing, do nothing, have nothing, are nothing.

They may avoid suffering and sorrow,

but they cannot learn, feel, change, grow, love, live.

Chained by their attitudes, they are slaves; they have forfeited their freedom.

Only a person who risks is free.

— Author Unknown

In the transfiguration, Jesus has come to the point in his ministry when he has set his face toward Jerusalem, knowing that he will likely die there. And because he is open to death, he is also open to life. In his openness to death he is open to Moses and to Elijah, and they come to minister to him. And in his open-ness to death, he is open as well to God. And in a blinding blaze of divine light, God comes and fills him. It happens to us as well, when we open our hearts to the joy and pain of life.