

BEING COMFORTABLE WITH BEING UNCOMFORTABLE

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. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

Matthew 17: 1-8

In all of the seminars and counseling sessions I have taken on self-care, they almost always encourage you to take some time away from your work and responsibilities, some time for quiet and solitude. And in most of these seminars and sessions, the leaders will cite the practice of Jesus, who is sometimes shown in the gospels going away alone to rest and pray and restore his spirit.

So, when Peter and James and John were invited to join Jesus on a mountaintop retreat, you can imagine that they jumped at the chance. Just thinking of the luxury of getting away from the daily grind of life on the road with a gaggle of undisciplined disciples, and even more, getting a break from the noisy and needy crowds that followed them every step of the way—just anticipating it, their stress levels went down several notches. And, of course, they weren't just thinking about the peace and quiet, the down time. They were also looking forward to, well, whatever it was that Jesus did when he went off alone. Pray, I suppose. Or maybe just sit still and meditate. Whatever it was, it would be better than working crowd control or scrounging around for food enough for five thousand or being harangued by Pharisees.

So you can also imagine their surprise when this retreat didn't turn out to be quite as cozy and comfortable as they presumed. Peter tries to cover his anxiety and fright by pointing out how nice the weather is and then wondering if they might set up some kind of shrine for Moses and Elijah, while the other two stand there with their mouths open, unsure of what to do or say, wondering, "Why are Moses and Elijah here to begin with?"

No doubt about it, it was an uncomfortable situation. But somehow through their fear and discomfort they began to see something in Jesus that they had not seen before, even though they had been in close quarters with him everyday for at least a couple of years now. But now they begin to see Jesus in a different way.

Jesus was always trying to get us to see things—the way seeds sprout, the way bread dough rises, the way birds are fed. But these are just exercises. What Jesus really wants is for us to pay closer attention to what we see all the time, our neighbors, our world, ourselves. But sometimes we have to be made a bit uncomfortable, to be pulled up short in order to see what we are looking at. To see it for what it really is, to see it as if for the first time, even though we may have looked at it for years.

It took a strange and discomfoting experience for the disciples to see Jesus more clearly. And sometimes it takes an uncomfortable experience for us to see things around us more truly.

I've been thinking about Bryan Stevenson quite a bit these past few weeks, since I saw the movie "Just Mercy" and read the book it is based on, a book and a movie that has made me uncomfortable in many ways.

Bryan is a lawyer who founded and directs the Equal Justice Institute in Montgomery, Alabama, which is dedicated to challenging racial and economic injustice in our country, particularly as it gets played out in the criminal justice system. And he insists that to see the structural racism and the systemic bias against the poor you have to get uncomfortably close to some people that we usually like to view from a distance, if at all. He insists that unless we get uncomfortably close, we don't really see them. Sometimes his work takes him into prisons and onto death row. He gets uncomfortably close to the inmates he represents. He gets uncomfortably close to their families and their communities. He gets uncomfortably close to the families and communities of the victims of crime. He gets uncomfortably close to the prosecutors and law-enforcement personnel.

He does all this in order to understand, to see more truly who these people are that we have sentenced to death, and to see them as more than just the perpetrator of a crime. He says something that may make some of us uncomfortable because of our strong feelings about law and order, crime and punishment. He says that no person, no life should be defined solely on the basis of whatever crime they have committed. He says that each of us is more than the worst thing we have committed. It is a way of seeing people more clearly and more truly once you have gotten uncomfortably close. It is a way of seeing our neighbors that runs a bit more closely to the way Jesus saw his neighbors, the way God sees all of us.

Not all of us are called to go into prisons and onto death row in order to get uncomfortably close to others. But we are called to be more diligent in seeing our neighbors. Not only those who live next door or across the street, but maybe even more, those in the neighborhoods we might not feel comfortable visiting. Seeing the invisible poor, recognizing the despair in the faces of the strangers we encounter, making ourselves more aware of the hidden forms of violence against the dignity of women and people of color.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that the strangest thing the disciples witness is not the shining face and dazzling clothes of Jesus on the mountaintop. She says that the strangest thing of all will not occur to the disciples until later, "when they saw that shining face bloodied and spat upon, those dazzling clothes torn into souvenir rags." She says, "I'll bet they had to re-think what that glory was all about." (*Dazzling Darkness*, *Christian Century*, Feb 4-11, 1998, p. 105)

This is the strange and new world that God is opening up before them, and before us. A world that unsettles some of our comfortable habits of thought. A world where the glory of God's chosen one, the Christ, is revealed along the path of self-giving; where the power of God is revealed by responding to the hatred of the world not with force and retaliation but with the power of love—suffering, sacrificial love that goes all the way to the cross.

And sometimes we have to be pulled up short in order to see it, even when it is staring you right in the face. Jill Duffield tells about being in a taxi cab in San Francisco. She says:

I made conversation with the driver. Originally from Iran, he has been in the United States many years, retiring from the trucking business only to realize that he couldn't live off of his Social Security payments. That's what got him driving a cab, 16 hours a day, four days a week. It was the cost of housing, he said, "that kills you," that makes such unrelenting demands. "Sometimes," he said, "we really suffer." He lived an hour from the city where it was cheaper, but still making ends meet was a challenge. Not long before we arrived at my destination, he asked what I did for a living. I told him I

was a pastor. He asked if I preached every week. "Most weeks," I said. Our conversation drifted to the beauty of the place around us, the many things there were to do in the area, "if you have money."

He pulled over to the curb, I paid, and he got out to get my bag. As he handed my suitcase to me he said, "Pray for me." Then emphatically again, "Pray for me." I asked his name. I told him mine. Suddenly, I saw him in a whole new light. Not just a cab driver, but my brother, one for whom I had been entrusted to pray. I saw Jesus in a whole new light, too. Not the one I flew across the country to speak about. Not the one present on the seminary campus where I was to stay. Not one contained in the boxes in which I place him, but one who transcends any limits I try to impose upon him, more majestic than the mountains on my left and right, and yet as close as the person right in front of me. In those moments of revelation, transfiguration, I don't know what to say, but I am left only to listen, for God, to Jesus, in the clouds and in taxis too. ("Looking into the Lectionary," *Presbyterian Outlook*, Feb 5, 2018)

Peter and James and John were expecting to go on a quiet retreat on the mountaintop, but were pulled up short by their experience of the transfiguration of Jesus. But in their discomfort, they began to see Jesus in a whole new light. Not so much more clearly, as in physical eyesight, but more truly. Seeing him for who he really is; seeing more unmistakably the purpose he has come to accomplish in the world.

And one hopes that this uncomfortable experience shakes them awake so that they not only see Jesus, but also begin to see their neighbors in a new light.

Maybe our prayer today should be, Lord make us more comfortable with being uncomfortable.