

THE HILLS ARE ALIVE

Luke 9:28-36

Many of my earliest memories take place in Stowe, Vermont, the adopted home place of my father's family. The story goes that the family was on tour in New England and had a few free days, so went exploring. Their travels brought them to Vermont and as they traveled along Route 100 the landscape was so familiar that they were transported back to their beloved Austria. And here, the story takes two paths. My grandmother, Maria, claims the credit for discovering the Farm on Luce Hill in Stowe, with my Papa also claiming the credit. Whatever story is correct, after being literally homeless for several years following their escape from Austria, they found the perfect place with a rundown farm on a hillside in Vermont. Family legend is that in 1943 the family "bought a view!"

Every June as soon as school was let out for the summer, Pop would pile the six of us and Mom in his Oldsmobile '98 for a week at the Trapp Family Lodge. In those days it was a far cry from the 5 star resort it is today, but that did not matter for we had returned to my beloved mountains. Raised a mere 5 miles from some of the prettiest coastline in all of Rhode Island and Massachusetts, by the time I was seven years old, my heart belonged in the mountains. Bright and early on our first full morning after our arrival, you would find several of us had already hiked up to the chapel in the woods that my Uncle Werner built to Our Lady of Peace in gratitude to God for returning home safely from World War II. It was not unusual for us to hike to the chapel several times in one day.

While in college I worked summers as a waitress in the main lodge. The 'girls' living quarters was over the Gift Shop, roughly a half a mile down Luce Hill. Every time I would walk up the hill to work a shift I would fix my eye on the point at the crest of the hill where it almost seemed as if the trees would part like a curtain opening my eyes to the panorama of the Nebraska Valley bordered by the Worcester Range. Every. Single. Time. Regardless of my mood or my energy level, I would catch my breath and literally feel the peace of Christ wash over me. I imagine it is the same feeling many get at the ocean. Interestingly, coming to the crest of Afton Mountain heading east on 64, feeds my soul in much the same way.

About eight days after Jesus had shared the hard lesson on forgiveness and loving one's enemies, he took Peter, John and James and went up on a mountain to pray when his appearance completely changed, his clothes flashing like lightening. Does anyone else find it amusing that before the transfiguration on Jesus, Peter, James and John were almost overcome with sleep? What is it with these guys??? However, they did manage to stay awake and saw the glory of the Lord. This experience was so profound for Peter that he immediately wanted to erect three shrines, one for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Peter wanted to capture and control this mountaintop experience to experience it over and over again.

Mountaintop experiences are moments when a person feels an extraordinary closeness to God. They are typically the kind of experience one wishes to last forever, but one June afternoon in 1998 I was quite ready to come down from the mountain. Part of my sister-in-law's grief process on losing her middle child and son Marc, was to retrace the many hikes Marc took in the mountains of Vermont. There are special guide books specific for taking these treks and I do believe Pat had all of them. I was on a holiday visiting in Stowe when Pat invited me to accompany her on an "easy" 3- or 4-hour hike.

We got going around 9 AM on a cool June morning following the markers for the trail she had selected. I was actually in pretty good shape from walking an hour each day so felt prepared for a nice gentle hike. Three hours later we reached a lean-to built into rock where it began to snow. I kid you not. I was pretty tapped out by this time and was quite ready to eat our lunch and start our descent. Pat was not having it urging us on, "It's only a little farther..." By now, my legs were getting rubbery when ahead of me I spied a number of ladders straddling deep crevices in the mountain. Yes, I crawled over those ladders and still we kept on. And on. And on. We finally emerged from the woods unto an open meadow which turned out to be a ski trail on Mount Mansfield. Pat continued urging us forward. I had taken off my hearing aid because I was sweating so heavily and bowed my head into the ongoing climb. Suddenly, Pat and her friend Ellen did a swift about face and rapidly started down the mountain. My faced registered confusion when Ellen grabbed my sweatshirt and said, get down, fast, it is thundering and lightening!!! She did not have to tell me twice. I have always been fearful of lightening and this was truly too close for comfort. 3 hours later we reached the base of the mountain – our easy 3-hour hike had become a 10-hour forced march! That was one mountaintop experience I did not ever care to repeat.

Mountaintop experiences should be part of everyone's faith journey - a time when you are totally awed with God breaking into your lives. They can happen anywhere and are not limited to actual mountainous terrain. Perhaps the argument can be made that, today, we have far too few peak experiences to savor. Such a dilemma points to our wretched inability to see the luminous, the glorious, the holy and the sacred in the world around us, in the mess and mundane of our lives. Think about it. The holy breaks into our lives every single day. Why is it that we do not see the holiness of the moment when:

A child crawls into your lap for a story?

The hand of the homeless reaches out for a sandwich?

The strains of the music that moves you floods your soul?

You take a prophetic stand for justice in the chambers of city hall, the county commissioners or the school board?

You take time to pray?

You hold a newborn baby in your arms for the first time in awe of this perfect miniature; this awe-inspiring work of God?

You open the pages of Scripture to read and study?

You come through disagreements to the other side with forgiveness and reconciliation?

You pray for the sick in a hospital room?

You awaken to a spectacular sunrise?

And so on. (Homiletics, 1995).

What are we to make of this startling, shattering experience on the top of Mount Hermon? What impact should it have on our everyday faith journey? The transfiguration was a special event in which God allowed certain apostles to have a privileged spiritual experience that was meant to strengthen

their faith for the challenges they would later endure. But it was only a temporary event. It was not meant to be permanent. In the same way, at certain times in this life, God may give [some of us] special experiences of his grace that strengthen [our] faith.

We should welcome these experiences for the graces they are, but we should not expect them to continue indefinitely, nor should we be afraid or resentful when they cease. They may have been meant only as momentary glimpses of the joy of heaven to sustain us as we face the challenges of this life, to help strengthen us on the road that will – ultimately – bring us into the infinite and endless joy of heaven.

And I believe these God moments are all around us. We spend too much time rejecting the wicked, ordinary and secular nature of our world. We spend too little time transforming the secular into the sacred, the ordinary into the momentous. We need to slow down and appreciate even the smallest in-breaking of God into our lives. It can be something as simple as someone's kindness, or as great as answered fervent prayers.

This past week, I know people around the world were praying for this kind of in-breaking at General Conference in St. Louis. If you have followed it at all, you will know this did not happen. If you recall my February newsletter article, I was quite accurate in predicting what I thought would happen. For the established denomination, nothing has changed. 864 delegates from around the world passed church legislation known as the Traditional Plan with a 53% to 46% vote, which reinforced restrictions on same-sex weddings by United Methodist clergy and prohibits ordination of LGBTQ persons. These limits have been a part of our Discipline since 1972. Additionally, the General Conference passed some provisions that relate to churches wishing to exit the denomination. The reactions across our Conference and denomination are strong, filled with sadness for many. This is a time we all need to extend gentle grace to each other.

But here is what I want you to know. As I stated in February, regardless of the outcome of this General Conference, I will continue to welcome all to Marquis Memorial. This week, nothing has changed with the call of Christ before us. The language in our Discipline remains, stating that, "All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status or economic condition shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection." Also, "The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth" regardless of sexuality. This acknowledgment is also affirmed in the belief statement of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, a principal proponent of the Traditional Plan. This language did not change and our openness to all people did not change.

I believe among the faith community of Marquis there may be those who are relieved and celebrating the adoption of the Traditional Plan as well as those who favored the One Church Plan. We will continue to be together, worship together, share the Lord's Supper together and especially continue the work of Christ in our world together.

Since Tuesday afternoon, I realize I have been grieving. My grief has little to do with the final vote. My grief has to do with the way I witnessed Jesus followers spew venom and hatred at one another. My grief has to do with the picture this continues to present to so many of my unchurched family.

My grief comes from the mistreatment I saw against brothers and sisters in Christ. My grief comes from the horrible fact that the lack of kindness so prevalent in our world today is well entrenched in the church I love. This is what I find so heartbreaking. Why would anyone, seeing what I saw, ever want to become part of the people called Methodist? Should any one of you need to process this further, my door is always open for conversation. I do think we will see some brother and sister United Methodists in the U.S. leaving the denomination as a result of this ruling, perhaps some whole congregations. It is my fervent prayer this does not happen. Breaking up a family, any family, and especially the family of God should be a source of great sadness and grief. In spite of the tone of this message, the Good News of Jesus Christ remains true and faithful. Into this bleakness, God breaks through. Into the very depths of despair, I am reminded of the scriptures urging us to love one another. I am reminded that I am beloved, precious child of God and beautiful to behold. And so are you, and you, and you, and you, and...

In closing I refer you to the following Scriptures:

“The message you heard from the very beginning is this: we must love one another.” (1 John 3:11)

“And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” (John 13:34)

“Do not take revenge on others or continue to hate them, but love your neighbors as you love yourself. I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19:18)

“Above everything, love one another earnestly, because love covers over many sins.” (1 Peter 4:8)

“Be under obligation to no one - the only obligation you have is to love one another. Whoever does this has obeyed the Law.” (Romans 13:8)

“My children, our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action.” (1 John 3:18)

“No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in union with us, and his love is made perfect in us. We are sure that we live in union with God and that he lives in union with us, because he has given us his Spirit.” (1 John 4:12-13)

“Do all your work in love.” (1 Corinthians 16:14)

“Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another. Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together.” (Ephesians 4:2-3)

To conclude:

“You must all have the same attitude and the same feelings; love one another, and be kind and humble with one another. Do not pay back evil with evil or cursing with cursing; instead, pay back with a blessing, because a blessing is what God promised to give you when he called you.” (1 Peter 3:8-9)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.