

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

February 14, 2021

*It's a Love Thing*

Rev. Susie Maxwell

*Let us pray . . .*

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. And Valentine's Day. They're both focused on love.

We all get the Valentine's Day thing — hearts, cards, candy, sentiments and maybe some hugs and kisses. Stuff like that. The thing with Valentine's Day though is this: Maybe you have love in your life and

maybe you don't. Valentine's Day is great if you do and you're on the receiving end of all its trappings.

But if you feel there is no love in your life, or something of love is missing, then any store you've been to since after New Year's has been a painful reminder with all its pink and red and foil this, that and the other in this season of the commercialism of human love.

(pause)

Thank God — for real — for the Transfiguration.

Think of it as a Cosmic Valentine that doesn't happen just once a year for some of us. It's a story reminding us of a continual moment for *all* of us. And where Valentine's Day tends to prompt us to single out one, Transfiguration holds that all are one.

I've been studying Dr. Alexander Shaia's work (he's also the guy whose work we are using across Lent). Shaia says that in the ancient tradition,

Transfiguration Sunday begins “The Great Hundred Days” which will bring us to “The Great Feast of Pentecost” and that this 100 day season is about union and communion or how two become one. That is perhaps another way of saying this season is about God’s love.

The point of these Great Hundred Days is transformation.

Originally it was being crafted during a period of theological discourse and wrestling, and typically those things are about identity formation. In that process emerged the idea of Lent with its penance and atonement. Even the idea around Ash Wednesday was a later addition.

But originally, this season was, as Shaia says, about the bodily practices that tend to our yearning that our divisions and our separations lessen. So, these 100 days are about engaging in practices that create deeper vitality, unity and community toward the truth that all are one — That

we are all the beloved of God. And from that deep recognition is the yearning to be *more* of that beloved.

Now being UCCers, we like history and information. We tend to work things out in our heads. Talk up a storm. And I can guarantee that I'm likely to get more of you to show up at a talk than I am to join me on a walk that ends with communion on a hillside. But a Pastor can dream and I'll keep moving us in those directions.

And lest we forget, as Shaia reminds all you head people, you can't *think* your way to union and communion. Can't stay in your head and achieve oneness. Heads don't create the space for transformation, hearts do. And the thing we all need to help establish, encourage and embody change — or transformation — are spiritual practices that engage the body and the spirit. Like dancing, or using ashes.

Shaia says that the Great Hundred Days is about the spirituality of John's Gospel because John is the text of how two or more become one. And John's Gospel holds the energy of the mystical practices of how that happens — because John's entire Gospel *is* the transfiguration — and builds to Pentecost.

Across these next 100 days, many of the focus texts are from John's Gospel, so we'll be unpacking those things as we go along. But for now, since there is no Transfiguration story in John, Laura read for us the one from Mark's Gospel, since we are in year B. There is also such a story in Matthew, Luke and 2nd Peter.

Now Mark was composed for Gentile Christians - Jesus' early "followers of the way." It was written to strengthen their faith in a time of persecution from emperor Nero.

This particular story allows both the disciples and Mark's audience a moment with the fullness of Jesus.

The editors of “Texts for Preaching” Year B write that the disciples, in common with many Christians throughout the church’s life, want to have the glory that they can see without the message they they must hear, but the two cannot be separated. Over and over, Mark lifts up both aspects of Jesus’ identity, relentlessly recalling that the suffering will yield to triumph, but the triumph cannot be had without the price of the cross.

The word transfiguration is from the Greek *metamorphoó*. *Metá*, meaning to "*change after being with*" and *morphóō* meaning "*changing form in keeping with inner reality.*"

The result being that Transfiguration means to grow beyond ourselves.

It is a difficult concept and beyond what our heads alone can grasp, so the Gospel writers give us an image, because images can go where words cannot. And in this image and in this moment, Jesus is dazzling. Because of and through God, Jesus’ true self, his inner self, is revealed

through his bodily form. And because it is unlike anything Peter, James or John have ever known, they are terrified. And in not knowing what to do, Peter wants to build 3 shrines to capture the event.

Now, critical to the story is the appearance of Moses and Elijah.

Moses represents the law and Elijah represents the prophets.

The critical piece is the tension between the two:

The law — which stands for structure, tradition, organization  
is in tension with

The Prophets — which stands for compassion, mercy, prophecy  
and moving beyond.

The thing is, as Shaia reminds us, we all have a Moses and an Elijah side and they don't live easily together. And our task is to fall in love again with that which is not like our preferred way and preferred style.

The Transfigured Jesus represents the place where the two stand —  
Between tradition and moving beyond tradition  
Between structure and compassion.

If we're able to stand in the tension between Moses and Elijah, we're  
able to see Jesus.

This is also the place where we might be made more whole, more one —  
hence the union and communion. We are, as Shaia says, the incorruptible  
substance of God. Not that I am, but that WE are a radiant part of the  
Cosmos and the cosmos is a beloved of The Holy One.

I think the lectionary leaves off the most interesting verses in the  
Transfiguration story, verse 10 which says, *So they kept the matter to  
themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.*

Now part of this is written because it's Mark's Gospel which is full of secrecy, which is used as a story-telling device to affirm for Mark's audience Jesus as the Messiah.

The beauty of our faith invites us to live into the questions, live into the tensions of this earthly realm and God's realm. Live into our comfort and discomfort and this season of the Great Hundred Days is a period inviting us to go to those places through rituals that get us out of our heads and into our hearts and souls in order to strengthen and affirm Whose we are.

As we prepare to go into the rest of this Valentine's Day, my prayer is that you will take the time to either walk out a giant heart in the snow (or in the sand for our southern friends). Or fog up a window with your breath and draw a heart — pondering what keeps you from standing in the vastness into which we are all held — Remembering that our journey's here are but one heartbeat in a Cosmic love to which ALL belong.