

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
Feast of the Transfiguration
Luke 9:28-36

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Today's program is sponsored by Lucia and Marshall Lloyd in honor of their daughter Kendall as she starts college at Kenyon College.

I am intrigued by a quirk of language. The common word "day" means a 24 hour period of time. The word "day" also means the part of the day which is not night. So the definition of "day" includes night. It's part of the 24 hours. This is true even though we also define night as the opposite of day, which is specifically not day.

There are other common examples of this language paradox. We talk about having five fingers on each hand. What is a finger? It's one of those five digits. So the definition of "finger" includes the thumb. Except that the definition of "thumb" is the digit that is not one of the fingers. So the definition of fingers includes the thumb, and also considers the thumb not one of the fingers.

Or the common word "meal" means what you eat and drink at breakfast, lunch, or dinner. So the drink is part of the meal. Except that the drink is also defined as the thing that is not the meal itself.

It is odd to consider that something could be both part of something and the opposite of something, and yet there it is. Night is part of day, and night is also the opposite of day. And we are so accustomed to going about our lives with both views of reality that we hardly notice the paradox. But the fact that we have the ability to see both views of reality at the same time (night is part of day; night is the opposite of day) comes in handy, because we realize that if we can see both views of reality at the same time with day and night, fingers and thumbs, meals and drinks, we have the capacity to see it in other aspects of life as well.

It is our capacity to do this that enables us to enter into today's gospel passage about the Transfiguration. As I was looking into this passage, I was wrestling with what language to use to talk about the two realities that are present here. We talk about the physical world and the spiritual world as if they were two separate worlds. They may seem as different as night and day. And yet I have the sense that ultimately, the physical world is also part of the spiritual world, included in the spiritual world. It seems similar to the way that the hours after dark are still part of our 24 hour day, and our thumb is still part of the fingers on our hand, and our drink is still part of a good meal.

There are some people who would deny this, or say that the only things that exist are material objects and mechanical forces. There are a variety of versions of that view. Some of them are a form of Darwinianism which takes the view that the only thing that exists in the universe is the survival of the fittest. In this view, human love is nothing more than a fancy adaptation for the sole purpose of getting us to reproducing to perpetuate the species, and trick us into sticking around long enough that our offspring can survive on their own. In this view, even friendship, cooperation, ethics, laws, altruism, are nothing more than a fancy adaptation for the survival of the tribe whose purpose is to perpetuate the species. There is no purpose in life except passing along your genetics and then you die. It's not that I think that view is completely wrong, it's that it seems like a woefully narrow and incomplete view of a reality that has so much more magnificence and wonder to offer.

Most of us have a sense that there is more to the mystery of the universe than passing along your DNA, and that there is more to ultimate reality than material objects and mechanical forces. There are a wide variety of words to describe that "more." Some people talk in terms of a veil between the physical world and the spiritual world, and sometimes describe times when we are able to glimpse through the veil some of what is on the other side. Our scriptures contain accounts of people who receive visions or dreams from the spiritual world, or hear someone from the spiritual world speaking to them, or in some cases receive a visit from an angel or other messenger from the spiritual world. There are other people who don't have experiences that are that specific, but still have the sense that there is an infinite love and goodness in the universe that we are all part of. My own reading of the scriptures gives me the sense that there is a spiritual world in which the past, the present, and the future all exist together. It is a spiritual world in which those who have already died and those who have not yet been conceived all exist together. It is a spiritual world which is free from pain and limitation, in which there is complete love, complete peace, complete joy. Divine light radiates everywhere. The gospels use the phrase "the kingdom of God."

It is this spiritual world that the three disciples see in today's gospel passage. Moses and Elijah have been there the whole time, even though Peter, James, and John haven't been able to see them until now. There is the radiance that is dazzling, more than our earthly senses are used to. Part of the importance of this passage is to let the disciples, and us, know that this spiritual

world exists. The other part is to deliver the message from God: This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!

In other words: pay attention. Do not get so distracted by material objects that you forget about the most awesome things in the universe, including infinite benevolence and love which cares wholeheartedly for you. Whatever access you have to the spiritual world, pay attention, listen, learn. The person of Jesus Christ coming to us from God in human form is an expression of how important we are to God, and how important it is to God that we know it.

So now we're going to switch gears for a moment. When Susan Foulk was here last Sunday, she said she'd come across a book called "Chemo Pilgrim". It was written by an Episcopal priest who is diagnosed with cancer, and when she finds out she will be going through chemotherapy, she decides to add pilgrimages to monasteries to the spiritual journey she's on. When Susan saw the book she thought it might be of interest to me, and bought me a copy as a gift. I enjoyed reading the book, and there was one page in particular that stood out.

The author, Cricket Cooper, is visiting a place called Zen Mountain Monastery and she says this: "We had been instructed in dealing with discomfort during seated meditation. In other, less formal groups I'd been with, it was allowable to shift a position if you were suffering from significant discomfort. You could quietly uncross and recross your legs, for example, if that might alleviate the pressure or issue. At Zen Mountain Monastery, we were instead invited to acknowledge the discomfort and then try to let it go, without moving. "Yes, knee, you are feeling sore there. I acknowledge you, but I'm not going to move. We were not told that we could not, under any circumstances, shift an inch, but we were **invited** not to move as a discipline. If ignoring the leg or foot or shoulder seemed impossible, then instead try to focus all of the mind on the area. Be curious, and ask questions. What exactly did it feel like—what were the sensations? Pain is not just one thing, always the same. Did it feel prickly? Was it a slow burning sensation? Were there stabbing pains, and what happened then in between the stabs? Was there relief? Was there throbbing? In a bizarre twist, trying to get inside the pain, for me, frequently dissolved it on the spot. Trying to name and dissect the details of the pain, bearing with it, also gave the pain space to be a piece of my experience without taking over the entire experience."

She goes on to talk about how countercultural this approach is, since we have been taught to avoid pain and just try to get comfortable. She says, "Getting comfortable is our way of

running away from the present moment. If I can learn to sit on my cushion when my nose itches, or my knee aches, or my foot falls slowly and painfully asleep, and **not have to fix it immediately**, then I can learn to be equally fearless and constant in other arenas of my life. Everything that happens on the cushion is a rehearsal for everything that happens off it.”

She goes on to say that over the weekend she learns the definition of suffering. She says, “Suffering is the distance between how things are in the present moment and how we wish they were. If in the present moment I am ill and I can accept being ill, then there isn’t much room for suffering. I may experience pain, but I don’t have to suffer. But if instead I am sick and I am also angry that my body isn’t healing fast enough, and I am sad that I won’t be able to go to a certain party or gathering, and I am scared that I might not get better—all of these emotions focus on things that are not present in the moment; the more distance I create between where I simply am and what I want instead, the more I suffer.”

The definition she gives of suffering, “Suffering is the distance between how things are in the present moment and how we wish they were” is a very gentle way of wording it. Another way of putting it, which may be more common in our experience, is “Suffering is the distance between how things are in the present moment and how we think they ought to be.” It is often this thought that the way things are in the present moment is not simply painful, but existentially wrong, that causes all sorts of suffering. Acknowledging instead that pain simply exists in the present moment is much more manageable.

She describes the various ways we humans try to flee from pain, and the problem that even if we can flee from pain this time, painful situations just keep coming up. She concludes, “If I can sit on my cushion for an entire forty-five minutes and not shift my position in the face of significant discomfort, then perhaps the next time something challenges me in another aspect of my life, I will have the courage not to run, not to escape, and not to have to fix it. Zen training, and seated meditation in general, is training for the courage to show up, fully awake, in your own life. The more you do that, the more beautiful your experience of your life can be, and the less your happiness depends on external events.”

As I was reading and reflecting on her book, I realized that as I recognize the truths expressed in Zen Buddhism, I feel even more appreciative of the good news of the Gospel. I am still in the process of mulling over exactly why. What I feel is an immense sense of gratitude for a spiritual world that includes infinite peace and joy, infinite bliss, a spiritual world that includes

all of the past, all of the present, all of the future together, a spiritual world that includes those who have gone before me and those who will come after me, all united in the perfect love of God. And I feel even more of a sense of gratitude that this spiritual world also includes the physical world, which does have its pain. And more than that, God chooses to show up to experience pain, even the pain of crucifixion, because of that infinite love. Does God fix our pain? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Whatever happens, in the present moment, and in all of eternity, is embraced by God's infinite love.