

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text is from this morning's Second Lesson, from St. Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians:

<sup>18</sup>And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

The cover of our worship folder this morning includes a copy of Raphael's painting of the Transfiguration of Our Lord. Our painting of the Transfiguration here at Immanuel, on the wall high above our rear altar, is in the tradition of Raphael's great painting in that it shows Jesus, Moses, and Elijah floating above the mountaintop, with Peter, John, and James, still sleepy-eyed, on the ground gazing up at them. At first glance, you might think it a painting of our Lord's Ascension, but, no, it is the Transfiguration, and it is a fit salute to the founding Sunday of our congregation back in the middle of the Civil War, 1863.

Raphael's version of the Transfiguration is especially sublime, in my opinion, because it forges a unity between the beauty of our Lord and the mercy of our Lord. The disciples at the foot of the mountain are in evident consternation. A father has brought his son to them, that they might heal the lad. They have healed others. They have cast out demons. They have restored joy to others. And this case is especially distressing because the child hardly has a chance. He is sorely buffeted by a demon of convulsions:

...it convulses him till he foams, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him.

Naturally, the disciples want to heal the boy and help the father, but they are unable. But amidst all this chaos and heartbreak at the foot of the mountain, notice what Raphael has done: notice the arms uplifted and pointing up the mountain. They are pointing to Jesus. He is the one who can save.

As it turns out, Jesus does indeed save the boy. The story ends with the word of healing and with a word of amazement. It goes thus:

<sup>42</sup>...Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. <sup>43</sup>And all were astonished at the majesty of God...

Let me ask you a question: 'Twas it the miracle that astonished them, or the mercy? These onlookers, these village folk at the base of the Mount of Transfiguration: they behold Jesus heal the poor lunatic boy, and the Gospel says that they were astonished at the "majesty of God." But in the end, what is the true majesty of God? What is his true beauty? Is it the miracle of the healing or is it the mercy on

display in the healing? It is the miracle, aye, but also it is the mercy. A suffering lad and a grieving father receive health. That is indeed a majestic thing. But isn't this also a beautiful thing to see: the love at work in the life of Jesus.

This, then, is my theme on Transfiguration Sunday: You are never so lovely as when you are practicing love.

Consider the sequence of events in the story of the Transfiguration. I think we will find that the true beauty on display there is the way of the Cross. Let us credit the mercy that is unintimidated and undeterred by the Cross. The mercy is the thing. Mercy is the truly beautiful thing on earth.

So, before the Transfiguration, Jesus speaks of the Cross. He speaks of the suffering he is willing to bear that love might prevail. Peter has just given his Great Confession: Thou art the Christ of God! And Jesus responds by immediately speaking of the Cross:

<sup>21</sup>And he straitly charged them, and commanded them to tell no man that thing; <sup>22</sup>Saying, The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day. (Luke 9:21-22, KJV)

Next, lest the disciples miss the point that the way of the Cross is the right one for them too, Jesus makes the point clear:

<sup>23</sup>And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. (Luke 9:23, KJV)

This is the context for today's story of the Transfiguration: the theme is the Cross. And then, in the story itself, what are Jesus and Moses and Elijah discussing? What is the theme? It is the Cross once more. They speak of our Lord's "of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem." (Luke 9:31) Everywhere the Cross. Everywhere the willingness of Jesus to suffer if only love might be advanced thereby.

It is this way of the Cross that is shown to be beautiful on Transfiguration Sunday. The man is the same. His conversation is the same. His determination is the same. The blessing of the Transfiguration is simply that those three disciples are permitted, for a moment, to see Jesus through

heaven's eyes. They are permitted to see the beauty of a life wholly given over to saving others.

And such beauty is open to you too. Now I return to my beginning text:

<sup>18</sup>And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another...

This text speaks of a sanctified life. It speaks of a life that is being transformed into the image of Christ, from one degree of glory to another. It can come the way of a man, of a woman, of boy or a girl, that in following Christ we come to resemble him. And that is a very fine thing and a blessing on earth.

This text speaks of freedom. It assures us that we are not condemned to remain who we are or who we have been so far. It rejoices in a new path available to each of us: the path of taking up our cross and following on behind Jesus.

Therefore we need not run forever in the same old grooves. I have heard that on the high plains of our land, there are wagon wheel tracks from of old, from back in the pioneer days and their covered wagons. The wheels formed tracks, and the following-on wagons deepened those tracks, and the good, old soil of the prairies hardened and became like concrete, which can be seen to this very day. So, the wagons followed the old grooves and could hardly escape, it seems.

But you and I can escape from the old ways of sin. We can begin to follow Jesus, or we can renew our following of him with even more earnestness. And in the following, St. Paul suggests that we will be transformed from one degree of glory to another, so that we will come to resemble him whom we follow and we come to acquire something of the beauty of holiness that so adorned his life.

A good number of years ago now, we celebrated here at Immanuel a memorial service for a saintly young man named Tom Dorris — Deacon Tom Dorris. Some of you knew him. Former Pastor Raymond Schulze preached the memorial service, for Ray knew him well.

There was a line in Pastor Schulze's sermon that has remained in my mind ever since. Ray said that he meant no impiety, but he could not help but think that Tom Dorris approached the Throne of Grace, our Lord Jesus would find himself rather startled and confused and would exclaim something like this:

Do my eyes deceive me? I seem to see coming toward me *myself!*

Pastor Schulze's line here was an extraordinary way of saying that in his opinion, Tom Dorris had come to resemble the Lord he followed with such devotion.

And so it is with you and me: As we walk with Jesus, we become more beautiful. Many of you are already handsome, many of you are already pretty. But I am speaking of another kind of loveliness into which you can grow, no matter your present beauty, no matter your present age. I am speaking of the beauty of holiness that comes from walking with Jesus.

One of those among us who is already beautiful, already learned, already devout is Maggie Luthar, now to be baptized. For each of us, we enter the waters of baptism and we come up out of them looking pretty much as we did before, only wetter. But that is only part of the story, for if we could see baptism with heaven's eyes, we would see a countenance transfigured and garments dazzling white and the commencing of a life being transfigured from one degree of glory to another as that one follows our Lord Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.