

METAMORPHOSIS

A Sermon preached by Pilar Millhollen, February 11th, 2018

Readings: Excerpt from *Hallelujah, Anyway* (Anne LaMott); The Gospel of Mark, 9:2-9

We humans just hate change. Now bear with me for a second – I know this sounds like a blanket statement – but when push comes to shove, all of us are wired to resist forces, positive or negative, that shift us from our current state. I had a colleague that worked with me on a clinical pastoral internship at Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, and to me, he embodied this resistance in his religious structure. David is an orthodox Jewish rabbi born and raised here in Brooklyn, and I had a lot to learn about what his world was about, from our totally different religious orientations to even cultural references. We loved arguing in a safe and supportive way, talking through some very difficult things, from our vastly different frames of reference, and in spite of this dynamic, or maybe because of it, we became good friends. He said to me once, “see, the difference between us is your religion is always looking forward, forward, forward, and for us, we’re constantly looking backward to tell us how to live.” While this was a rather stark way to identify the differences in our worldview, it said everything about where he was coming from – religiously and socially. Change, from his orthodox standpoint, was something to be viewed with suspicion, something to be handled very carefully and accepted only within a certain framework. I used to demand why he paid literal obeisance to *some* of the 612 laws in the Torah, such as wearing garments all made of one fabric, but wouldn’t dream of obeying others, such as putting his disobedient child to death. Sometimes I would kid him that if he was really orthodox, he’d better put down his cellphone and never use electricity or running water again. I let him have it sometimes – what about people who are gay, or trans? What about women who want to be rabbis? Without revealing any overt prejudice, he would simply say, “it’s just not a thing for us. We have a certain way of being, and it’s how we are.” Sometimes he would call me out for being just as stuck in my chaotic liberalism, from his vantage point, as he was in his rigid conservatism. Over the course of getting to know David, though, what ended up surprising me was just how much he changed as we spent more time together. We were usually on the floors the same days and hours, and we would share experiences with patients. He would avoid going to the Christian patients, and after I had a couple of negative experiences with Israeli orthodox men, I started avoiding going to the orthodox Jewish patients. But when it was just the two of us at work, we inevitably started supporting each other. We would talk theology in the office on breaks, recount patient visits that had been particularly intense, and help each other understand the religious and cultural needs of patients from our very different faiths. I found myself trying harder to learn why he had such attachment to Torah, or why he refused to stay in worship when I would sing a prayer at our multi-faith service because there were rules in the Talmud that told him he wasn’t supposed to listen to women sing. (We had a few heated discussions around this point, as you might imagine.) He would marvel at the various explanations I would give him about how the Catholics pray and think differently than, say, a mainline Protestant or an evangelical patient. He would even say, “you really know all these different traditions – thank God I have you to ask!” But one of our most personal points of difference was around the reality of human suffering...the kind of suffering that has no redemption, no sense at all, that comes at us full force and is deeply and impossibly unfair. David’s response, no matter what it was, systemic injustices, murder, natural

disaster, was always, "God is in control." When I pressed him on this, with my own process-theology worldview that God's goodness also includes vulnerability, that maybe God doesn't cause or will human suffering, he would say, "well, when God isn't causing something to happen, it happens because He allows it to happen." I wasn't going to be sold on this, but neither was he going to be sold on my ridiculous belief that God suffers with us and maybe can be just as vulnerable as us. And then, one day, I was sent with a senior chaplain, Sister Elaine, to bear witness to a family whose cancer-free recovering nine-year-old son had just died on the operating table in a sudden and horrible turn of events. I don't know how long we were there, but being with his parents on the floor was one of the most devastating things I had ever seen. Grief truly knows no bounds. And if nothing else, it pushes us completely and utterly out of our ability to make sense of what we thought we knew to be true. And when we returned to the office to debrief for the pastoral care team, I was in tears. David was there, very silent, very sad, listening to the story. And in that moment, I turned and said to him, "I know you feel differently, and I don't ask you to believe differently, but do you understand now why I don't believe that God allows certain things to happen? That God didn't want this? Do you understand?" And he looked right at me and replied, "Yes. I understand."

Our reading for this morning from the Gospel of Mark, this strange and mystical narrative that Christians call the transfiguration story – shows up in multiple gospel accounts. It's wonderful in its sense of mystery, in its transcendence of the ordinary-ness of our lives, and it's also really weird. I've read it over and over, I've read commentaries from other preachers and teachers on the significance of this story. They focus on the figures of Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus, or the voice of God commanding, "Listen to him!" as proof of his messianic nature, his being the one they were all waiting for. But no one really pointed out what I couldn't ignore here, what Anne LaMott drives home when she says, "I want to change, but it hurts" – that this transformation that Peter, James and John witness forces them into a new way of seeing their beloved teacher. And, therefore, a new way of being in the world. *I want to change, but it hurts*. A new way of relating, a shift that means they can never go back to what was before. And, as the writer tells us, they were *phobeo*, struck with fear. *Waking up is miserable, and change is terrifying*. The transfiguration of Jesus with these superstars of Jewish prophecy, Elijah and Moses, left the disciples terrified, so much so that Peter says, can't we just stay here, in this moment of transcendence, basking in this *kabod*, this radiant essence of God. Because I don't know how I'm going to deal with things now that I've seen this. Then Elijah and Moses disappear, and Jesus is left, with a voice shouting, "Listen to him!" out of the clouds, a whirlwind cameo appearance by God Herself. This would be a bit much for me to handle. If this didn't freak James, John and Peter out, I don't know what would. But. Life goes on. They couldn't stay on the mountaintop, they couldn't stay in this moment – they had to return to the work that had to be done on earth. They had to return to life, but no longer as they knew it. They wanted to change, they chose to follow this crazy Rabbi Jeshua, but the boundaries were breaking so fast around them, they found themselves resisting the internal change that they knew they were called into. The transfiguration of Jesus is not actually so much about the transfiguration of Jesus. It's about the metamorphosis that happens for the disciples, a wildly difficult, totally imperfect, absolutely uncomfortable shift in their way of seeing Jesus, seeing themselves, and ultimately seeing the world that shook them to the core. And as Anne LaMott also recounts, this emergence is probably not going to well. But that

doesn't mean it's not supposed to happen. Theologian Karoline Lewis, regarding this idea of transfiguration, puts it this way: "We think we welcome change, but when it actually happens, we adopt stances of resistance and rejection. Or convince ourselves that the change can wait. That the time is not right. That the problems that will ensue are not worth the result of living into who we really are." *The problems that will ensue are not worth the result of living into who we really are.* Why wouldn't we look to remain comfortable, even if it means that we are missing out through those problems, through that discomfort, through shame, hurt, even sorrow, of getting to the other side of it and seeing the world with epiphany eyes. Learning that the fight was worth it when we gain a different, deeper, more real understanding of the world around us. When we can look and see each other for who we are, for real for real.

That day at the hospital after the little boy died, after I looked at Rabbi David with tears in my eyes and asked him to try and grasp where I was coming from, was a pivotal event. But not in the way you might think. What I began to see later, looking back on all our experiences together, the joking and the very real fights that we had, was that he was changing. He was transforming, evolving, despite his desire to stay the same. Despite his boundaries that were so important to him and his community, while maintaining his values and his identity, I saw a shift in how he related to me and to our colleagues. I was the one determined to stay the same. I was the one determined to break down his boundaries, to get him to loosen up, to see that there are many ways of being and living and loving in the world, but I wasn't really ready to let myself be shifted out of my own worldview in the process. Truthfully, shamefully, my unconscious self really just wanted him to become more like me. If it had been him witnessing the grief of that poor family, and asking me, "Do you understand why I believe that God has a plan in this grief, that there is a reason for this terrible loss, that God allows terribly unfair things to happen to people?" I don't think I could have responded yes, I understand you, David. Because I wasn't ready to entertain that how I saw the world in very important moments like this, wasn't the only way to make sense of hurt, and chaos, and suffering. That my so-called enlightened, progressive, radical self wasn't quite so radical as I desired to be. I resisted the shift that God was calling me into at the time, and only later did I begin to realize that my work was just beginning. And it's still evolving now. Even in seminary, even at Middle Collegiate Church, surrounded by like-minded radical progressive theologians and organizers, boy did we ever step on each other's toes sometimes. Our work around immigration justice, anti-racism, LGBTQ rights, fighting for our suffering creation, all of this got us into some really heated places. Because the work is personal, and it's difficult, and the solutions are never clear-cut. Because the queer, black woman's experience of being profiled in Bergdorf Goodman was very different than the white trans man's experience of going off of hormones to get pregnant, and being called a freak. Because the straight white middle class men and women, like me, were being asked to take a seat and listen when we jumped into conversations about race and racism in America. But also, we were being asked to take the hands of our colleagues and risk transformation. Risk being wrong. Risk it so we could deepen our understanding of the work we so desperately wanted to be a part of, so we could really live into God's most expansive expectations of us. I'm still learning how to do this, and I'm still working on taking those shards of progress that LaMott speaks of where they come, in faith that they are gradually teaching me to get clearer, to loosen my grasp on my own coveted worldview, not with the aim of diluting my values or who I am, but with the aim of creating more

expanse in my soul – a transfiguration from what I have been – that will help me love more authentically – madly, truly, deeply. This is the transfiguration of Peter. This is the transfiguration of James. This is the transfiguration of John. And in this scary, weird, crazy, rotten, amazing, cathartic shift, let us dive in too. Let us risk transfiguration because if we don't, we risk the possibility of keeping out the *kabod*, the radiance of God that comes with deeper understanding, broader awareness, those epiphany kind of eyes. Let's risk it for each other and for ourselves. Because the beloved community is worth it. We are all infinitely worth it.