

“Life-Changing Moments”

Luke 9:28-36

(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luke+9:28-36)

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February 14, 2010

When in doubt, just take a small step.

Douglas Coupland writes in, Life After God, about riding along in the American southwestern desert and hearing everyone doing a non-stop radio talk about Jesus. *“it seemed to be this crazy orgy of projection, with everyone projecting onto Jesus the antidotes to the things that had gone wrong in their own lives. Jesus is Love. Jesus is Forgiveness. Jesus is Compassion. Jesus is a Wise career Decision...I was feeling a sense of loss as I heard these people. I felt like Jesus was sex—or rather, I felt like I was from another world where sex did not exist and I arrived on Earth and everyone talked about how good sex felt, and showed me their pornography and built their lives around sex, and yet I was forever cut off from the true sexual experience. I did not deny that the existence of Jesus was real to these people—it was merely that I was cut off from their experience in a way that was never connectable.”* Coupland goes on in a similar cynical fashion until the next to the last page of his book when he confesses: *“Now—here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again...My secret is that I need God---that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”* (Quotes from Douglas Coupland, Life After God (New York: Pocket Books, 1994)

There is a deep longing to know God in Livingston County. People do not want to know about God. They want to know God. They need a real relationship with God. They are “soul sick and can no longer make it alone.” Perhaps you feel this way? Maybe you feel your prayers are just hitting the ceiling and bouncing back on your head.

Today’s Scripture clearly points out that Jesus is not interested in secret, back room, hidden from view spiritual experiences. Jesus wants us involved with God in a personal, public, every step of the way journey. If we look closely at this Transfiguration Scripture we can find a pattern to follow that enables us to personally encounter God and know God’s power. Here in this portion of Holy Scripture is a proven step by step process for intimately knowing God.

- First, we chose to partner with God in and through the Risen Christ. Jesus invites us, as Jesus invited the disciples to walk up transfiguration mountain with him.
- Second, we are challenged to live and grow our souls in community. The disciples could hardly survive this powerful spiritual experience together. Can you imagine what would have happened to them alone?
- Next, we expect God’s “g-factor.” The disciples sputter and stutter inane words that Jesus lovingly reframes.
- Fourth, we loosen up and enjoy God’s “f-factor.” The disciples finally come down from the mountain celebrating God’s real presence in their lives.
- Fifth, Jesus teaches us that the true secret to real life is service beyond self.

Let’s take a one step at a time walk together through this portion of sacred Scripture.

Step by Step: Partnership with Jesus can happen.

Jesus entire life, death, and resurrection demonstrate for us God’s desire to partner with us. On the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus reveals his heavenly persona and invites the disciples to know God intimately, to love God completely, and to serve God every step of life’s journey.

Because of the institutional mindset of the Church and the public’s reaction against it, people think that God wants to take something away from them. Nothing could be farther from the truth. God wants to give life abundant to us. God wants us to grow to be fully alive, fully mature human beings. God wants to reveal the heavenly reality that lies just under the surface of our earthly living!

In order for us to reach our full potential we are created to be in partnership with God. In the verses just above today's Scripture Jesus invites people to walk with God one step at a time. We follow all sorts of people. We follow the latest fads, whether clothing or technological. We follow the language and lifestyle of the group we choose to live with. We follow favorite sports figures by wearing clothes with their insignias. How many of us have University of Michigan or Michigan State University clothing? We follow political, media, or social leaders. Sometimes, you even follow your pastor! But, all these things and people we follow are just secondary. Jesus reveals to us the importance of a primary spiritual relationship with the Risen Christ!

To live in this world with a joy that knows no limit and a spiritual power that will take you through anything this world will take you through, you must make a conscious choice to follow Jesus.

After all, Jesus is the only person who actually knows the truth that sets us free. Jesus is the only one who knows the way to eternal joy right here and now. To find God, you must decide to let Jesus' words be more than sweet, pious sayings muttered on Sunday. Let Jesus be a partner for living everyday and you will find yourself surrounded by God's delightful surprises.

Years ago as I served as a student chaplain in what was then called an institution for the mentally retarded; I learned that many special needs adults know the Risen Christ in a personal, partnership kind of way that I just do not know. Through the years I have learned from them this surprising reality of God's blessing within their lives. They can teach us all about partnering with Jesus.

A few years ago at the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with the relish to run the race to the finish and win.

All, that is, except one boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times, and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and paused. Then they all turned around and went back. Everyone of them. One girl with Down's syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, 'This will make it better.' Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line.

Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for 10 minutes. ("What's Really Important?" from A Third Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul, p. 70.)

As you run life's race, who better to partner with than Jesus? You can choose to place your hand in his and walk together. Or, you can choose to be sick with desire for God. Today, I challenge you right now to go deeper into your soul than you have ever done and accept Jesus as your partner for life, your friend for all eternity. Jesus stands beside you to walk with you and to show you the ways that heaven is actually breaking into this world right now. After all, Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is right here, right now among us!

Step by Step: Jesus challenges you to live within a Christ centered community.

A second part of this process of encountering God in community is most easily done by belonging to a Chilson Lifegroup. Jesus invited Peter, James, and John to be on the mountain with Him. They did not go step by step up the mountain by themselves. Forget this solitary, Lone Ranger, Monkish, Individualism mentality that passes as truth in our Western culture. It is a lie to think that you can find God by yourself on a fishing boat; therefore, you do not need to be together with God's people. God creates you with a deep inner desire to be an integral part of God's worshipping and serving family. God did not create any loners! God creates a great number of brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, and parents and grandparents for God's big family here on earth.

Being a part of God's intimate family on a weekly basis grows your life with God! The Transfiguration Mountain experience is the model for how we grow with Christ here at Chilson. We meet with God in worship on Sunday! And, we grow with God in Lifegroups during the week. There is a flow between the small intimate group of friends who love us and know us well and the inspiration we experience in Worship as we are reminded that God's eternal, heavenly realm is actually present for us all during the week.

If you do not know the joy of belonging to a Lifegroup, then this week is a great time to decide to connect with a Lifegroup! You can find a contact person in the Herald. Call them up and start the process of step by step growing with God in a through the experience of Christian friendship!

Step by Step: Jesus offers you the “G-Factor”!

This next part of the process is very identifiable. There is mystery! On Transfiguration Mountain Jesus takes us beyond the rational into the deeply spiritual. All of us know times that we experience insight without prior rational knowledge. God wants us to grow. God wants to bless us by allowing us to use every bit of our minds. Then, God adds to our knowing that which could not be known without God’s help.

Perhaps this story of a medical Doctor and his wife will help us to understand this phenomenon. The Doctor decided that he needed some time to rest. He talked his wife into traveling from California up to Lake Tahoe, Nevada for the weekend. Unfortunately, he did not listen to the weather forecast. They were caught in a blizzard that forced them to change their plans and move north towards Reno. The snow kept falling. They ended up stuck in their mobile home for several days. When the books and videos were exhausted, the Doctor’s wife suggested they host a potluck dinner for the rest of the campground. He agreed. She took out her special Japanese Writing Box and created great looking invitations. That night everyone showed up with food and from strangers at first, they went to great friends by the end of the evening. Sometime into the evening a young couple showed up. The man was very talkative. The woman was withdrawn. She sat by the door and said nothing. The only time there was any spark of life within her was when she saw the Japanese Writing Box. Then, the spark lasted only a fraction of a second. The next morning everyone began to pack up to leave. The snow had ended and the sun was shining. The young man came up to the “Doc” and asked forgiveness for his wife’s actions of the previous night. “You see, we lost our baby several months ago from SIDS. He was only 4 days old. Since then, my wife who used to be a lively poet has been clinically depressed.” The Doctor accepted his request with a gracious no problem. When he told his wife, she immediately became aware of the importance of giving the depressed young woman her expensive Japanese Writing Box. Over the protestations of the Doctor, the wife took her gift to the young couples travel trailer and left it. Several years later she received this reply.

Dear Kathleen and Doc:

I know I’ve been remiss in not writing sooner, but perhaps after reading this letter, you will understand my reasons for not doing so – and hopefully forgive me.

I vaguely remember Al handing me your gift, unwrapping it, then ignoring it as I retreated into my solitude. The next morning, the first thing I saw after waking was the box. An errant beam of sunlight highlighted it, like a spotlight on a single performer in a darkened theater. Its simple lines and exquisite craftsmanship penetrated my muddled mind. I began to perceive elegance and beauty. I played with the drawer, the locks, hinges, and drawer pulls, captivated by its detail and precision.

I quickly dressed and for the first time since I became ill – yes, let’s call it depression because I can face that now – I went shopping. I bought wax and buffing cloths for my new box. The next day and daily thereafter, I went out looking for pens and inks and papers, exploring new places, meeting new people and thinking of poetry again.

When we returned home several weeks later, I started going to the library to read up on Japanese arts and crafts. I learned a lot about the box and the special techniques of Japanese wood crafting. I also became entranced with the works of Lafcadio Hearn, the English literary scholar who immigrated to Japan at the turn of the century, married there and spent the rest of his life translating Japanese folk-tales, legends and classics. In one of his stories he tells about Horai, a place where there is no winter and flowers never fade – and by reason of being young at heart, the people always smile. I named my box Horai.

I also went to the museum in San Francisco, where I could learn even more about the arts and culture of Japan. I am now a docent there. Al, of course, returned to work, and I, between my new avocation, museum work and household chores, was too busy and too excited to be depressed.

At this point, when I was so happy, I suppose I should have written to you, but then I found out I was pregnant. Old fears and doubts resurfaced, and I again put off writing. In any event, we had a lovely little girl in November – now two months old – at last I find myself free of the past. I can write to you honestly, appreciatively and candidly.

I’ve often wondered why you gave me the box. Was it pity? Was it a thoughtless impulse? No, these didn’t fit. Then, one day I learned that Horai is also called Shinkoro, which means mirage – the vision of the intangible. Now I understood that through intuition you perceived the intangible. You sensed what the gift would do.

I am returning the Horai box, not that I love it less, but so that you may have it in your hand if you ever need it to sustain another hapless soul. Should this never be the case, then I hope it will forever serve as a happy reminder of our meeting.

Sincerely and gratefully,

Sally

P.S. Our little girl is named Kathleen.

(“On Love” by Kathleen Pololsky found in A 3rd Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul. Pp.26-34.)

The G-Factor in all our relationships is that wonderful gift of grace from God! God sees the vision of the intangible that is beyond our rational world and touches us with grace! On the Mountain of Transfiguration Peter, James, and John receive a grace gift that will take them through the events of the next months.

- It was God’s grace that supported them when Jesus was arrested.
- It was God’s grace that forgave them when they fearfully ran away from the trial.
- It was God’s grace that calmed their trembling hearts in the upper room.
- It was God’s grace that enabled Peter to kneel before Jesus and accept forgiveness at the Resurrection breakfast in Galilee.

God’s grace carried them through! And, God’s grace will carry you through, anything! They were blessed with the opportunity to look beyond the mortal into the immortal. And, with Christ as your partner, you too are grace gifted!

The “F-Factor” happens!

Another clear and easily identifiable part of this spiritual growth process of partnering God is the “F-Factor.” That is, the foolishness factor! When we encounter God we say some pretty silly things. We put our foot in our mouth. We get hoof and mouth disease! Peter can’t think of anything profound to say, so he says let’s build some shrines and stay here and worship God! God knows that we make silly statements. Thank God that we are allowed, even loved when we do! After all, Jesus did say that if we want to get into the Kingdom of God we need to become like little children! Children sometimes say the most foolishly profound things! Children God’s love is real even when we make mistakes. We adults need to remember! Let me share with you an example of the “F-Factor” at work. It has traveled around the internet for years.

Last week, I took my children to a restaurant. My six-year-old son asked if he could say grace. As we bowed our heads he said,

'God is good, God is great. Thank you for the food, and I would even thank you more if Mom gets us ice cream for dessert.. And Liberty and justice for all! Amen!'

Along with the laughter from the other customers nearby, I heard a woman remark, 'That's what's wrong with this country. Kids today don't even know how to pray. Asking God for ice cream! Why, I never!'

Hearing this, my son burst into tears and asked me, 'Did I do it wrong? Is God mad at me?' As I held him and assured him that he had done a terrific job, and God was certainly not mad at him, an elderly gentleman approached the table. He winked at my son and said, 'I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer.' 'Really?' my son asked. 'Cross my heart,' the man replied. Then, in a theatrical whisper, he added (indicating the woman whose remark had started this whole thing), 'Too bad she never asks God for ice cream. A little ice cream is good for the soul sometimes.'

Naturally, I bought my kids ice cream at the end of the meal. My son stared at his for a moment, and then did something I will remember the rest of my life.. He picked up his sundae and, without a word, walked over and placed it in front of the woman.. With a big smile he told her, 'Here, this is for you. Ice cream is good for the soul sometimes; and my soul is good already.'

Jesus challenge: service beyond yourself!

We are not graced by God's presence to make us feel good. God does not intend to give us an ego boost. Rather, we encounter God so that we might be energized to do God's good work in our world. We are blessed with sacred moments that change our lives so that we might become partners with God to change the world. We are given a taste of the eternal so that we can identify the eternal breaking into our very world all the time. God works in and through us!

In one congregation in the 1980's, a respected member of the church announced to the congregation that God had burned a message upon his mind: "Heal the sick." He confessed he had never had such an experience before and worried whether he had gone too far in this "prayer stuff." He asked that if anyone had ever had such an experience to please help him. Before that day was over, 12 people contacted him to say, "Larry, if you are thinking about doing something for sick people who cannot afford treatment, count me in." Out of one man's vision has grown a free clinic in that city that serves as a healing place for the poor. It has saved the lives of many children and adults. The clinic was nominated to be one of former President George Bush's 1,000 Points of Light. (Story from Shawchuck and Heuser, Managing the Congregation, Pp. 112-11

- Think of the loss to the world if that respected church member had not shared his life changing moment with God.
- Think of what might have happened if the Horai Box was not shared!
- Think of what might have happened if that unknown man had not spoken words of love and affirmation to that little boy about ice cream.

God wants us to get involved with transforming this world. The process for regularly knowing God on a personal basis is clear:

Partner with Christ,

Be a part of a Christian community, a Lifegroup,

Expect to be surprised by the G-Factor,

Do not be afraid of the F-Factor,

And be prepared to share beyond yourself what God reveals. After all, the Risen Christ teaches us:

When in doubt, just take a small step with Christ.