

"The View from the Balcony"
Luke 9:28-36

One day a father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the firm purpose of showing his son how poor people live. They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family. On their return from their trip, the father asked his son, "How was the trip?" "It was great, Dad". "Did you see how poor people live?" the father asked. "Oh yeah" said the son. "So, tell me, what did you learn from the trip?" asked the father. The son answered: "I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them." The boy's father was speechless. Then his son added, "Thanks, Dad, for showing me how poor we are."

Even though it sounds like a cliché, I believe that it is true to say that perspective does matter. The way we see or don't see things makes a huge difference in our lives, relationships and even our world. Even today's Bible story from Luke 9 is about gaining a new perspective. In the story we have Jesus and three of his disciples going up a mountain so that he could pray. While in prayer, Jesus has a mystical experience of God's presence that his face shines with light and his clothes become dazzling white. Then he has a conversation with Moses and Elijah, two of the most important prophets for the people Israel, the Jews. This transfiguration experience was a major turning point for the disciples in helping them understand the true mission of Jesus.

There are a few elements in this experience that are very important for us in order to understand the perspective which the disciples were gaining. First, the location of the experience is very important. Mountains have always been seen as important places for people to experience God's presence. The Bible is full of stories of people encountering the holy on a mountain. The best example is Moses and his experience of the burning bush was on a mountain, and then later receiving the Ten Commandments on a mountain. Mountains are often associated with gaining new perspective on life.

Here is an example from Batavia, last week, there was an article in the Daily News about two local men going to Africa to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. John Riter and Wess Audsley are climbing this mountain as part of a larger campaign against cancer. "A battle against cancer can at times seem unending," John Riter says. He and his wife Liz, diagnosed with breast cancer in June 2008, have been in that fight for more than a year. "When you go through the cancer thing, you feel like you're constantly on the defensive. Life is being dealt to you and you can't do anything about it," Riter said Tuesday at his home. "This sort of turns it around. You feel like you're doing something more productive. It's a more positive experience."

Another important element in the story of the transfiguration of Jesus is the perspective of the disciples. Jesus had been teaching them about his mission and his vision for the fulfillment of God's covenant by creating a community of peace and justice. He was trying to help them understand that his being the Messiah was not about becoming a king with an army. It was about fulfilling the vision that was given to Moses and Elijah in the Law and the Prophets about Israel. It was about their being chosen to be a people who know how to live in peace and justice for all so that they can be a witness to the rest of the world. The people of Israel were expecting a Messiah who would come and restore the kingdom of David and who would be mostly a

military leader, but Jesus' mission was to create an alternative kind of community that defies the norms of domination and exploitation of the poor. What the transfiguration vision did for the disciples is open their eyes to see beyond the limits of their culture to see a vision for a change that would extend to the whole world and transform its systems of oppression.

Getting this kind of perspective is not always easy in life. In his book, *Leadership on the Line*, Ronald Heifetz, a professor at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government who has made a name for himself on this issue of gaining perspective, says that life can be like being on a busy dance floor. We get caught up in the dance. Our day-to-day activities can consume all of our time. The music of life keeps us going from step to step and at the end of the day we wonder just what we have accomplished, and sometimes we feel exhausted. According to Heifetz, we need to take time to gain perspective. He says that this is like being in a game, and watching it at the same time. Great athletes seem to have this ability – to step outside themselves and watch what they're doing. Heifetz talks about the importance of making adaptive changes in life when needed. Most of the time, when we face a problem, we try technical fixes which in the long run make no difference. But the real work is to be able to see what bigger changes need to be made.

Jesus had this ability to see life from the balcony. He was able to show his disciples that it was not enough to have just another king to rule the land. The whole system needed to be reformed. The whole system was corrupt. The miracle of the transfiguration is not that Jesus' appearance became different. It was the miracle of the perspective of the disciples. Once upon a time a group of disciples asked an elder, "Does your God work miracles?" The elder said, "Well, it all depends on what you mean by a miracle. Some people say it's a miracle that God does the will of the people. We say, it's a miracle when people do the will of God."

This kind of perspective is so important in our lives. We need these mountaintop experiences in order to see with clarity what is going on in our lives. Every once in a while we need to step off the dance floor to gain perspective. That is why people have been fascinated from the days of old by mountains and places of high elevation that provide us with a view.

In her sermon on this text, "Thin Places," Barbara Brown Taylor notes that like our ancestors in faith in ancient times, we humans "are in hot pursuit" of God. And we won't be persuaded by scientific proof or logical arguments about the truth we seek: "what [we] are all after is an experience of the living God. [We] have had enough explanations – the careful process of mounting dead butterflies on pins. [We] want to come face to face with the real thing." She describes the "thin places" so cherished in Celtic spirituality as "places where the veil between this world and the next is so sheer that it is easy to step through," or better, as "cracked doors between this world and some other, brighter place where God is no absentee landlord but a very palpable presence." (*Home by Another Way*).

These experiences help us gain perspective on our call as followers of Christ. They also help us remember that the vision of Christ was not always about making life easier for us but always about making it worthwhile. The story of the transfiguration of Jesus was preceded and followed by stories about his imminent death and his confrontation with the religious leadership of the temple and the Roman Empire. He was going to be executed as an enemy of the state. In fact, immediately after coming down from the mountain, we are told that Jesus confronts an evil spirit and does an exorcism which was very symbolic of his confrontation with the authorities of his day. Jesus' mission was about being chosen by God, blessed to be a blessing, broken for the domination and oppression of the world, and given for the redemption and liberation of the

world. This was the big picture of Jesus' mission. If we stay too close to the ground, we may miss it because we are busy on the dance floor trying to maintain our steps with the music. But the call of this Transfiguration Sunday is to step off the dance floor, to go up to the balcony, whatever that maybe for each of us, to see the vision of God for our lives and our world.

In his book, *God Has a Dream*, Bishop Desmond Tutu writes, "All over this magnificent world God calls us to extend [God's] kingdom of shalom-peace and wholeness — of justice, of goodness, of compassion, of caring, of sharing, of laughter, of joy, of reconciliation. God is transfiguring the world right this very moment through us because God believes in us and because God loves us. What can separate us from the love of God? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And as we share God's love with our brothers and sisters, God's other children, there is no tyrant who can resist us, no opposition that cannot be ended, no hunger that cannot be fed, no wound that cannot be healed, no hatred that cannot be turned into love, no dream that cannot be fulfilled." What it takes to fulfill this dream is our ability to step off the dance floor every once in a while to see the world from the balcony.

The story is told about a snail and a cherry tree. It was winter. The snail decided to climb to the top of the cherry tree. While he was doing so a beetle popped out from behind a knot in the tree. The beetle said to the snail, "Where are you going?" The snail replied, "To the top." The beetle said, "Are you nuts? There's nothing up there!" The snail said, "I know. But by the time I get there, there will be!" Amen.