

A Good Place to Be"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

PRESERVING GREAT MOMENTS

I like the way Eugene Peterson translates our Scripture for today concerning Peter's response to the glory of God. Peter said, "Rabbi, this is a great moment! Let's build three memorials ... one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah."

I guess human beings are naturally attracted to great moments. In fact, I've noticed that many of the most popular programs on cable TV are dedicated to the great moments of the past.

During the football season this past year, a family member excitedly told me, "Did you hear that Miami lost?" "Miami lost? No, I hadn't heard. Who beat them?" "Boston College. Someone by the name of Doug Flutie through a long pass at the end of the game to win it."

She didn't realize she had been watching ESPN Classic, the show that brings you the great moments of sports history! For her, at least, the game was just as exciting as it was for those of us who watched it many years ago!

But, usually it doesn't work out that way.
Most of the time it's not possible to recreate the excitement of great moments in sports or in any other endeavor for that matter.

MEMORIAL ON THE MOUNTAINTOP

I think that's especially true when it comes to the great moments of faith. The mountaintop experience is a fleeting thing. The luminous cloud comes and goes in a flash.

Even if we had a videotape of the experience that Peter, James and John had on the mountain that day, I don't think it would help us. There are some lights that are just too bright to view and some experiences that are just too deep for words.

Indeed the Bible tells us that when Peter spoke up and suggested erecting memorials on the mountain to commemorate this vision, it wasn't a reasoned response to the revelation of God's presence. Instead it was the spontaneous ramblings of a man who was too stunned by glory to think about things clearly.

When I think about the high points of faith in my life, I can understand Peter's action. I too have had an overwhelming sense of God's presence and call. Oh I didn't see a vision on the mountaintop, but I did sense God's presence in a unique way. The question is this, "What do I do with that experience? Dare I tell others? Do I brag about how close I am to God? Do I attempt to put up a memorial on the spot where God touched me in a special way?"

MORE THAN A MEMORIAL

It is tempting. It is tempting to construct a life based upon memories of mountaintop experiences. But, experiences even powerful experiences of worship are not enough to make a life of faith. God's presence is a moving target. God speaks and the cloud moves on. It happened that way long ago, and it happens that way today.

God's voice calls us as it called Peter, James and John on the mountaintop. Leave your memorials to glory behind and look instead at the very human face of Jesus.

That's what happened to the disciples. Did you notice the radical shift? One moment the disciples see glory, and the next moment they see only Jesus ... the one of whom the Divine voice in the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

In a sense the history of the Christian Church is a history of those who have attempted to create memorials. Throughout the world we have shrines to this "saint" or that "saint" people who supposedly had great experiences of God's presence. Many people want to visit those shrines as way of trying to get closer to God themselves. Maybe the glory will rub off. Maybe I will catch a glimpse of what touched this famous person in the past.

Many others take pilgrimages to the Holy Land for the same reason. They seem to think that if they get closer to where the story happened they'll get closer to God.

GLORY IS FOUND IN JESUS

I think that we're being told through this story that faith does not grow by building memorials. Faith occurs only through the living presence of Christ.

Peter in his confusion about worship tells us, "Let's set up memorials and keep the glory forever." The voice from the cloud tells us, "Glory is found only in Jesus. Look to him alone, listen to him alone and go with him wherever he leads."

More often than not, we follow Peter rather than the living Christ. We are a memorial building people. We tend to live in the reflected glory of the past.

But, the God we serve is not limited to the past. The God we serve is not about shrines and memorials to moments that were great but fleeting. The God we serve is about a daily presence and a daily charge to go where Jesus goes and walk where Jesus walks.

True glory and true worship is not to be found in the shrine on the mountaintop, the Holy Land or even a building like this one where we are accustomed to worshipping God. True glory and true worship are found when we obey the word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. True glory is found when we love one another as he has first loved us.

GOD'S PRESENCE IN A LETTER OF LOVE

One church chose as its Lenten theme, "Forty Days of Love." Each week members of the congregation were encouraged to show their love and appreciation in different

ways. The first week they were encouraged to send notes to people who had made positive contributions to their lives.

After the first service a man in the congregation wanted to speak to his pastor. The pastor describes the man as "kind of macho, a former football player who loved to hunt and fish, a strong self-made man."

The man told his pastor, "I love you and I love this church, but I'm not going to participate in this Forty Days of Love stuff. It's OK for some folks," he said, "but it's a little too sentimental and syrupy for me."

A week went by. The next Sunday this man waited after church to see his pastor again. "I want to apologize for what I said last Sunday about the Forty Days of Love. I realized on Wednesday that I was wrong."

"What happened on Wednesday?"

"I got one of those letters!"

The letter came as a total surprise. It was from a person the man never expected to hear from. It touched him so deeply he now carries it around in his pocket all the time. He said, "Every time I read it I get tears in my eyes."

It seemed like such a little thing. But, this one small letter proved to be a transforming moment in this man's life. Suddenly he realized he was loved by others in the church. His entire outlook changed. He said, "I was so moved by that letter that I sat down and wrote ten letters myself."

It came from a mailbox rather than a mountaintop, but the effect was the same. This man experienced the presence of Christ.

THE HUMAN FACE OF GOD

And I think this man's experience provides a kind of blueprint for how God's presence comes into our lives as well. Generally speaking, God's presence does not come through statues of saints from days gone by or rare ecstatic visions.

God's presence comes to us through the touch of a hand or a few well chosen words of comfort. God's presence always seems to come in a very human way.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that human beings are in any way "godlike," but I am saying that God often chooses to work through humans. I am saying that as the disciples on the mountaintop saw God in the face of the human man, Jesus so we often see the face of God in Christ in other human beings.

It's like that old hymn we used to sing, "Let others see Jesus in you."
Or as the apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthians, "You are the body of Christ."

IN CHRIST, NOT LIKE CHRIST

When I thought about letting others see Jesus in me and being the body of Christ in the past, I often thought of my Christian duty to "be like Christ" in my actions. I was sort of like those kids on the playground basketball court who wanted to "be like

Mike" imitating Michael Jordan in his style of play and the Nike sneakers he wore ... because they admired him.

But, just as most kids couldn't really "be like Mike" so I couldn't be like "Christ." I knew what Jesus would do. Quite often I just didn't do it. I doggedly kept trying to be like Christ, but I got more and more frustrated with my lack of progress.

And then it struck me. The work of God still occurs through the Spirit of Christ and not through human effort. My attempts to make myself like Christ by trying harder were futile because I was relying on my own power and not on the intervention of God. It is not who we are and what we do that makes the difference. Instead, it is the presence of God which turns a normal human interaction into a special moment of grace and revelation.

Since I was "the pastor" I assumed that the presence of Christ would always come through me and my actions. What I came to learn was that the presence of Christ often came to me through the people I was attempting to help.

We are the body of Christ, but Christ is the head of the body. The time and place of His coming is up to Him and not to us. But, when he comes, when we sense the power and presence of Christ, we need to listen. We need to be aware of what we are being told and what we are called to do.

THE PRAYER

A minister friend told this story of what happened in his first church. He said that he was excited about his first charge. He was working hard and trying to change things for the better. And then one day he heard that one of his members, an elder was ill and would not recover.

This was the first time he had to face the fact of death with another church member, and he was quite frankly scared to make the visit. But, he got in the car and took the two hour drive to the big medical center. When he arrived he thought that the elder would lean on him for support and ask desperately for healing.

It didn't happen that way. Instead, he said when he arrived, this man "woke up, hopped out of his death bed and invited the pastor to get on his knees beside him." The elder's prayer went something like this,

"Lord, I ask you to help our pastor with his new church. You know he doesn't know much about what to do, but he's enthusiastic, and he wants to serve you. Help him. Fill him with you Spirit. Amen."

With that, the man hopped back into his bed, thanked the pastor for coming and promptly went back to sleep. The young pastor was overwhelmed. He had gathered up his courage to minister in the name of Christ and was feeling pretty good about himself. But, instead, he himself had found the presence of Christ and new life in what this dying man did for him.

I have personally experienced the same sort of thing over the years of my ministry. And gradually I have learned the truth. Yes, the presence of God in Christ has a human face, but it is not always the face I expect.

THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

One of the great doctrines of the Reformation is a doctrine entitled the "priesthood of all believers." It means that all of us have direct access to God through Jesus Christ. Through the grace of God in Jesus Christ, all of us can approach God's throne and ask for forgiveness and healing.

But, it occurs to me that this priesthood of all believers works the other way around. Just as we can all come to God through Jesus Christ, so God can come to us through all of his children. There is something holy and mystical about our relationship with each other in the church.

Yes, I know. We in the church often don't act like the people we are called to be. We childishly harm each other with our words and actions. We disappoint each other with our thoughtless and selfish ways.

But, sometimes, by the power of God's Spirit, we are changed. Others see Jesus in us. We are the body of Christ, and the moment is transformed by a holy glow. We begin to see others in a new light. Something comes to us from upon high, and we are given the courage to go on down the mountain and face the dangers that lie ahead.

COMMUNION

This morning we will participate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It is also a sacrament we call Communion.

In the sacrament we have (as a hymn puts it) "mystic sweet communion" with Jesus and the saints of all the ages the church, the Body of Christ. Indeed, that's what we confess every week when we talk about believing in the "communion of saints." We believe that it is possible to encounter the presence of Christ in a very human way.

I invite you to celebrate that belief with me this morning.
As you pass the bread to your neighbor say to him or her,
"The body of Christ broken for you."
As you pass the drink say to your neighbor,
"The blood of Christ shed for you."

This is a holy moment.
This is a moment when we experience the presence of God.
As Christ was transfigured on the mount long ago, so we can be transformed by this moment.

Amen.