

“IF YOU PROCLAIM IT, THEY WILL COME”

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Luke 9:28-42

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“If you build it, they will come.” That’s a familiar line in our language and it’s from the movie, *Field of Dreams*, well actually it’s a misquote. The actual line is, **“if you build it, he will come.”** Depending on how you understand the line, it refers either to a reconciliation between the main character and his deceased father or the appearance of long dead baseball players on a baseball field built into a cornfield in Iowa or the community’s support for the owners of the farm and the baseball field. In any event the phrase, “if you build it, they will come,” has grown to become meaningful in a variety of contexts.

One of those contexts used to be the church, or at least the way the church approached the idea of evangelism. It’s not so much the case out here in Vancouver or Western Canada, but if you venture to the heartland of mainline Christianity in southern Ontario, including places like Toronto, you find intersections where all four corners are occupied by old churches, usually one of them being a Presbyterian or United Church, which of course were likely Presbyterian ones before church union took place in 1925. The way that churches were built back in the day was that you kind of measured the distance from the last church and when you had gone far enough, you built the next one. It was truly a case of if you build it, they will come. And it worked, by and large, in the context of a culture where more or less the majority of the population, at least those with Western European backgrounds, were church goers. You assumed that people would go to church so you built one where it would be accessible and easy for people to attend. I remember researching the history of my previous congregation, Grace Church in Calgary. It began its life as a church plant of the first Presbyterian congregation in Calgary called Knox Presbyterian Church in the downtown core. As the city grew out to the south, the faithful members of Knox felt that it would be a good idea to plant a new congregation on the outskirts of the city. Eventually a plot of ground was purchased from the Hudson’s Bay Company for the princely sum of \$12,000 and the magnificent new sandstone building was erected. And people did come, lots of people.

It was somewhat similar here at Richmond. Our story here is recent enough that many of you know it because you lived it from its early days. We still have one charter member in our congregation, Betty Goodwin. Many of you remember the early days with Dr. Tony Plomp, touring Lulu Island on his bicycle, scoping out the territory for a new Presbyterian Church. Eventually in 1962 a new church, this church, was built and people came.

But it’s changing these days, isn’t it? It used to be that if you built it, they would come, the people would come. **But the old calculus no longer holds.** We know very well now that even if we build it spectacularly, people won’t come. We can hardly hold on to the ones who are already here! The pandemic has simply accelerated the trends that were already present in mainline denominations and others as well, around the exodus of people from churches.

So we need a different approach, we have to learn a new calculus. We can no longer afford to be complacent, trusting that people will seek us out. Offer meaningful worship, connect through caring fellowship, provide opportunities for discipleship for all ages and stages of life. We can do all these things and yet it won’t make a difference, unless – our worship, our fellowship, our discipleship is rooted in something beyond our own ability, in someone beyond ourselves. **All that we do as a church must begin with the**

proclamation of Jesus. It is our unique message in a world where there is so much that vies for people's attention. **But that proclamation cannot remain only in our words, but must be lived out in our actions, in our mission.**

The transfiguration of Jesus brings both proclamation and action together. The account of the transfiguration of Jesus is one of the most difficult texts to understand from a purely human perspective. The sudden change in Jesus, the transformation of his face, his clothes shining dazzling white, the appearance of Moses and Elijah and finally, the voice from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!" There's so much to unpack but so little that seems practical for our context.

This is thick theology, weighty stuff. In the words of one theologian the transfiguration is important because it does the following: it reveals Christ's divine nature, confirms his Sonship, foreshadows his death, secures his place in the stream of Israel's salvific history, exalts him above the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah), and prefigures his resurrection.¹ That's a heavy load of theology, thicker than any of us can manage.

Don't get me wrong, this is very important theological work. I've probably tried to preach on every one of those themes at some point in my ministry. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness, the light of the world, the Son of God, **but what does that mean for us?** This is what I mean when I say that we can't just proclaim Jesus in word, we must somehow also live out what we proclaim in ways that make a tangible impact in our human context.

What the transfiguration of Jesus means, at least from my perspective, is that God cares, God cares for us, for you and for me, for the world. There's a reason why the story of the transfiguration is recorded in each of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, and it also shapes the entire gospel according to John, which begins by saying that the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. But in each of the synoptic gospel accounts, the transfiguration is followed immediately by the account of the boy suffering from seizures. **And here's the connection, here's where the ineffable, the indescribable, becomes relevant for us in our human context.** Here's why Jesus matters, why we have to proclaim him, not only in word, but in our living and loving.

We probably don't spend enough time on the story of the sick boy. **But he too is a beloved son, an only son of his father.** He too is dearly loved and his father begs Jesus to look at him, to heal him. If the transfiguration of Jesus took place in isolation, apart from the human dimension of suffering and need, it would still affirm all those thick theological things about Jesus we mentioned earlier, but it would have no practical impact on the human condition. But Jesus takes three of his disciples with him up the mountain to be witness to his transfiguration and they don't stay on the mountaintop as Peter suggests **but descend into the valley where the reality of human need immediately confronts them.** The whole point of God becoming human, of the incarnation, is that God does choose to act in isolation, apart from the human dimension. **God enters the human dimension; God chooses to engage in our human condition, which is the very reason for God become human in Jesus.**

Before this starts to get too thick, let me get back to the practical. The transfiguration means that God cares about our human condition. Jesus, who shines like the sun, Jesus who is the glory of God, who is the beloved Son, comes down to us and heals the beloved son of his father. In Jesus our hope is real, not only for this world, but for eternal life, **but absolutely for this world as well.** The transfiguration means that God is not absent in Ukraine today, that God doesn't just sit back in some heaven somewhere and dispassionately

¹ Debbie Thomas, *The View from the Valley*, Journey with Jesus. January 31, 2016

observes our human stupidity and cruelty. The Jesus who shines on the mountain is the same Jesus who heals in the valley and this same Jesus cares about the plight of the people of Ukraine and every place where peace is overrun by violence and hatred, where dignity is run over by ambition and arrogance.

We need to proclaim it, but more than just with words; we need to live it as Jesus did, with actions. You and I may not be able to stop a Russian tank or missile, but we can pray for peace and we can pray for those who are afraid and suffering. We can donate to organizations which are providing relief for the streams of people who will be refugees in this war, we can tell our politicians to pursue whatever pressure can be brought to bear so that tyrants who think that the rest of the world just won't care enough will realize just how wrong they are. **We have to proclaim Jesus, that God cares about our human condition and as Jesus commissioned his disciples to do what they initially were unable to do, but ended up being able to do when empowered by the Holy Spirit, so too Jesus commissions us to act in his name, by his Spirit.**

But here's the thing. If we begin to proclaim the hope that we believe Jesus brings, if we tell people about the love of God in Jesus Christ, a love that will not let us go, **then people might begin to believe us and they might start showing up expecting to see the difference Jesus can make for their lives.** And then what? **If we're going to shout about the mountaintops, we need to be ready to engage in the valleys. Are we prepared for that?**

People are always drawn to those who can provide something, to people who can meet a need. I remember once when I was in Korea, Sophie and I were walking to a subway station and there was a woman on the street asking for money. Most of the people ignored her, walked around her, told her to go away. I wanted to help, just something small. I gave her a dollar. I thought she would say thank you and move on, but she didn't. She stuck her hand out again, give me more, give me more, she said. So I gave her another dollar. It just made her even more demanding. Now she wasn't asking, she was demanding. I wasn't prepared for that. **If you meet a need, people will come. Are we ready if people with true needs start showing up at our door? Are we really ready to proclaim Jesus?**

If we don't have anything exceptional to say about Jesus, if his luminescence isn't something we want to talk about or are too embarrassed to proclaim, then no one will bother us. **If we have nothing to offer, no one will care.** But if we offer Jesus because we believe he is good news, then people will expect something of his disciples. If we give people hope because we tell them Jesus loves them, they will come, but are we prepared for that? **Are we prepared to proclaim Jesus with more than just our lips, but also with our lives?**

It's interesting that on the mountaintop the voice from the cloud says to the disciples, this is my Son, my Chosen, **listen to him.** Why listen, **why not just look at him!** I mean, wow – this is a moment made for TV, not radio. Look at him shine, look at my Son, the dazzling one, the voice could have said. It would seem to be such a visual experience, **but the voice says listen, not look.** And I think it may be because looking is easy **but listening is harder.** To do the hard work, we need to get past the visual distractions, the glory and get to the real work of serving, of listening, less glamorous, but needed.

If we proclaim hope, people will come, but we need to be prepared for the less glamorous work of the valleys, of listening, of serving, of caring, of being patient, of bringing compassion, mercy, grace, love. Do we have a vision of a church that will grow? Do we feel compelled to tell people about Jesus? The best way to do that is to be ready to serve. **If we proclaim Jesus, people will come, but we need to be ready to serve.** People won't come just because we build a church. **They will come because we meet real human need with the love of Jesus. This is the new calculus and really, it's just the old math, isn't it?** Love one another as I have loved you.

Love your neighbour as you love yourself. Love your enemy and do to others what you would have them do to you, even if they don't do to you what you would have them do. **People will come because we tell them Jesus will meet their needs and Jesus tells us in turn to listen to him, to engage in the hard work of serving.**

That's why Jesus invites us to his Table and offers the symbols of his body and blood, broken and shed for us. Jesus was always ready to serve, even if it meant giving his very life. **People were drawn to Jesus because he offered hope and when they came to him, he was prepared to act, to serve.** It is the way of our Saviour and it must be the way of his church, his people. So come, come to the Table he provides and be nourished by his love, by his compassion, by his mercy and his grace, so that we too may be ready to serve in the way of Jesus. Come.